

Reframing the *New Mestiza*: Identity Politics and Social Commitment in Chicana Art

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an interdisciplinary approach to some of the most iconic pieces of Chicana Art using Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Parallels between the textual and visual representations of identity politics and social commitment in Chicana feminist art and Anzaldúa's work, respectively, will be established through the concepts of "Borderlands" and "New Mestiza" as interpretation keys. The article begins by addressing representations of geographical borders as a unifying theme; then, it establishes a correlation between the concepts "Borderlands" and "New Mestiza," and the reformulation of female identity represented in Chicana visual art. Finally, it will explore the purpose of the social commitment of the author/artists and how it is represented in their literary/artistic productions. The visual art of the selected Chicana visual artists, including Ester Hernández, Yolanda M. López, Alma López, Santa Barraza, and Judith Baca, accurately portray the experience of Chicana women theorized in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. (PAL)

KEYWORDS: Anzaldúa, Chicana artists, new mestiza, social commitment

Inspired by the Chicana feminist movement, which started in the early 1970s, cultural theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa presents a new feminist epistemology in her groundbreaking semi-autobiographical book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Based on the social and communal experience of Chicana women living on the borders of the US and Mexico, the

collection of essays and poems accurately exposes sexism, racism, and classism endured by women of color living on the Mexican-American border. Its concepts, such as borderlands and new mestiza, have fostered attempts to rebuild and strengthen the self-definition of Chicanas, which has created a more cohesive female alliance among them. At the same time, these concepts have been instrumental in generating Chicana social activism in the American cultural landscape. Another special feature of the book is its genre, which the author herself categorizes as an *autohistoria-teoria*, a non-linear autobiographical narrative, which weaves together biography, history, fiction, and myths with a strong theoretical dimension. Anzaldúa explains: “I call it ‘auto’ for self-writing, and ‘historia’ for history—as in collective, personal, cultural, and racial history—as well as for fiction, a story you make up. History is fiction because it’s made up, usually made up by the people who rule” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 242). The symbiotic trait of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which interrelates the author’s experience as a Chicana woman and the collective accounts of her community, including imagery and oral tradition, is particularly meaningful when establishing a dialogue with visual representations of Chicana artists.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, aligned with the ideology of the Chicana feminist movement, some Chicana writers developed feminist epistemologies in their literary works, such as Cherríe Moraga (*Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Paso Por Sus Labios* [1983]) and Ana Castillo (*The Massacre of The Dreamers—Essays on Chicanisma* [1994]), while fiction writers represented the Chicanas’ oppressed lives in their narratives, as Sandra Cisneros (*The House on Mango Street* [1984]) and Denise Chavez (*The Last of the Menu Girls* [1987]) did. These decades also saw many Chicana artists starting to examine the challenges the women of their community faced in a male-dominated and class-based society in their visual productions as a way of social activism. They arranged exhibitions in local Chicano/a communities or painted murals, mainly in the southwestern regions of the USA, thus reaching

people in their everyday environments and confronting them with forms of injustice they might otherwise ignore. As Laura Pérez contends, “the various arts are a form of highly developed thought, each through the language of its own medium” (10)

Since the 1970s, Chicana feminist art has played a key role in the evolution of Chicana self-awareness, insofar as artists have sought to denounce their triple oppression, so that they will empower other Chicanas to overcome the limitations imposed on them due to their class, gender, and ethnicity. As their works in Chicana literature testify, Chicana artists including Yolanda M. López (1942-), Ester Hernández (1944-), Judith Baca (1946-), Santa Barraza (1951-), and Alma López (1966-) have created socially committed art. By shaping the cultural identity of Chicanas, these artists visually educated not only Chicanas, but also mainstream society. The selected artists share the same cultural background as Anzaldúa: they are American women with Mexican and indigenous roots; their cultural identity is shaped by opposing cultural systems, Mexican and American; their gender oppression is enforced by their Chicano community; their racial, gender, and class segregation is imposed by the dominant society; they share the heritage of Spanish language and colonial experience.

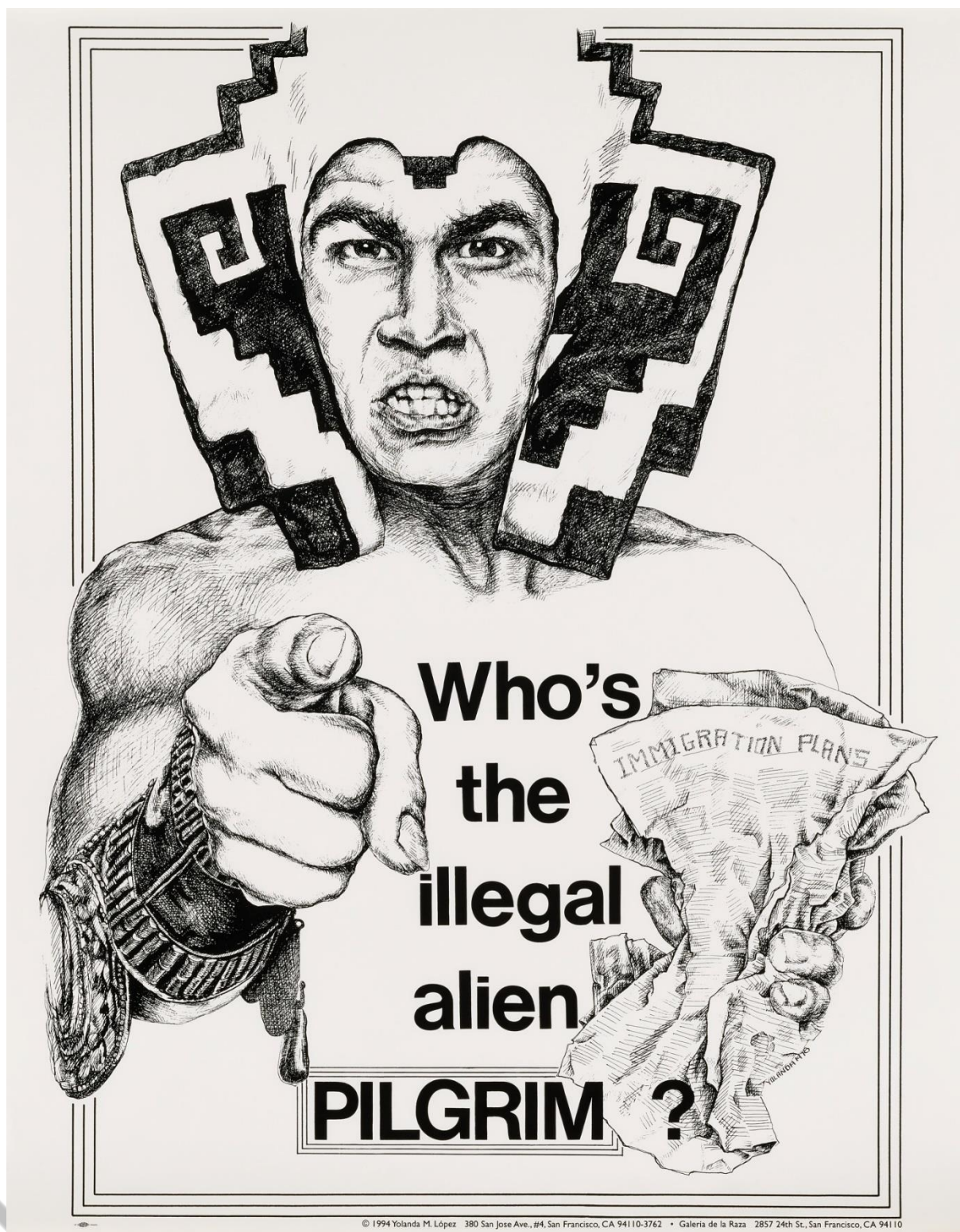
Relying on Anzaldúa’s concepts “borderlands” and the “new mestiza,” I investigate selected works of the visual artists listed above in order to establish a dialogue between Anzaldúa and the Chicana artists whenever the lost indigenous past is reclaimed, female myths are retold, or a new female identity is reconstructed. Furthermore, the social activism of the authors/artists will also be highlighted when portraying Chicana (his)story.

The border and the borderlands

In the USA, the building of a Chicano/a identity intertwines with the history of the border with Mexico. Chicano/a literature and art tend to focus on the theme of the border as historically embedded in the consciousness of the whole community; as Anzaldúa notes: “[t]he

border fence that divides Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It left 100 000 Mexican citizens on this side, annexed by conquest along with the land” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 29). By problematizing the geographical border, Chicana writers and artists alike disrupt received notions of nationalism and cultural identity, claiming indigenous and Mexican legacies, as well as the American culture without choosing a monolithic perspective.

Borderlands/La Frontera begins by addressing the interrelationship of the history of the border with the segregation of Mexicans and Chicanos in the United States, describing the Chicanos’ experience both in their community and in the dominant society. Anzaldúa grew up in a region where the border between Mexico and the United States is an “unnatural boundary” (25), where different cultural and political systems collide and coexist. She explains that “[g]ringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not. . . . Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only ‘legitimate’ inhabitants are those in power” (25). These historical conflicts and facts were exposed and visually narrated in López’s famous poster *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* a decade earlier, in 1978.



© 1994 Yolanda M. López 380 San Jose Ave., #4, San Francisco, CA 94110-3762 • Galeria de la Raza 2857 24th St., San Francisco, CA 94110

Yolanda López, *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* 1981. Offset lithograph on paper. 58.7x44.5 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Samuel and Blanche Koffler Acquisition Fund, 2020.43.1. ©1978, Yolanda Lopez

López portrays an Aztec man holding a document of Immigration Plans, pointing his finger towards mainstream America, revealing the incongruence in the Anglo-American version of US history, as well as in the restrictive immigration policies targeted at the natives of the territory. The poster challenges the alleged superiority of mainstream America during the political debate over the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1978 by drawing attention to the fact that before the arrival of the pilgrims the territory was inhabited by indigenous peoples, represented by the Aztec figure. The visual representation of the cultural roots of this US territory brings history to the forefront by highlighting the economic, political, cultural, and social oppression endured by Chicanos and Latin-American immigrants in the USA. *Borderlands/La Frontera* is particularly accurate when referring to the pathological character of the border experience, to the border as an unsafe place, inhabited by those excluded by the standards of the dominant society: “Borders are set up to define places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. . . . The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead” (25). The border functions symbolically and materially in dichotomies like pure/impure, equality/difference, inclusion/exclusion; it is thus a contradictory place that generates unwanted mixing and contamination. This idea is also present in López’s poster, insofar as it emblemizes the resistance and self-assertion of the Chicano community, claiming to be recognized as true Americans while recognizing Mexican and indigenous cultural roots.



Estér Hernández, *Libertad* [Liberty]. 1976. Etching. 56x38.5 cm. ©1976, Ester Hernandez

Hernández's *Libertad* [Liberty] (1976), one of the earliest images of Chicana feminist art, also points out the artificiality of the border between the US and Mexico. She depicts a subversion of the Statue of Liberty, portraying a woman carving the statue into a Chicano symbol, stressing the indigenous heritage of the US and welcoming people of indigenous descent into the territory. As Alicia Gaspar de Alba claims, "the imposing figure from European mythology is transformed by a Chicana sculptor into a pre-Columbian goddess welcoming *her gente* to the New World of Aztlán" (*Chicano Art* 141). The word Aztlán, the mythic land of the Chicanos placed at the bottom of the rebuilt statue, not only alludes to the fact that this particular community is not one of immigrants, but it also reminds Anglo-Americans that their Promised Land was founded on Chicano ground. Anzaldúa states:

The oldest evidence of humankind in the U.S.—the Chicanos' ancient Indian ancestors—was found in Texas and has been dated to 35000 B.C. In the Southwest United States archeologists have found 20,000-year-old campsites of the Indians who migrated through, or permanently occupied, the Southwest Aztlán—land of the herons, land of whiteness, the Edenic place of origin of the Azteca. (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 26)

The Statue of Liberty, a symbol of American identity, functions in Hernández's work as a symbol of Chicano resistance to assimilation in the dominant culture. This image captures the coexistence of the three cultures molding the Chicano hybridity: indigenous, Mexican, and American. Therefore, the artist disrupts neat separations among cultures, overturns and defies imperialist views and resists assimilation from both countries. Furthermore, by depicting a place where the USA and Mexico become one, the artist acknowledges affinities to both countries,

and validates Anzaldúa's argument "todas las partes de nosotros valen" [we are all our parts] (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 110)

The emergence of the new mestiza through myth revision

A recurrent theme in both Anzaldúa's writings and Chicana visual art is the deconstruction and reformulation of the patriarchal discourse imposed by the border culture, manifest in the retelling of stories used to control women, as well as the reconversion of female myths and figures into empowering feminine models. The border experience is particularly painful for Chicanas, since they are victimized by the triple oppression of imperialism, racism, and sexism; they are part of a colonized people and a minority culture within the USA, and are women both in a traditionally patriarchal community and a patriarchal Anglo-American society. Therefore, they endure constraints not only sustained by the social structures of their own community, but also reinforced by the dominant society, resulting in a constant external and internal struggle to break and transcend this duality of cultural norms. The Chicanas' triple oppression can be understood through the perspective of intersectional feminism (Crenshaw 150), as different vulnerabilities and inequalities overlap, interact, and create a maximized form of distress. In their experience, race inequality is intertwined with inequality based on gender, class, and sexuality, compounding multiple experiences of discrimination. Chicana writers and artists voice these overlapping experiences while recognizing the historical contexts in which they operate, underlining their impact across generations. Particularly important to Anzaldúa's framework is the unveiling of this female oppression:

A woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. Alienated from her culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified,

she can't respond, her face caught between los *intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits. (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 42)

Chicano patriarchal culture grounds its definition of morality and social order on control over women, as well as on the dichotomy of good woman/bad woman. Sexist notions traditionally imposed include the exaltation of female virginity or motherhood as unique forms of dignity, or even definitions of appropriate behavior with double standards for men and women (Lobo 51). In this context, the role of myths is crucial as they provide examples to be emulated and precedents to be repeated that reinforce the distortion of women's roles. Chicana writers and artists claim that myths must be reformulated as they perpetuate sexist cultural stereotypes, conveying notions of womanhood that have remained unquestioned from generation to generation. In order to reconstruct their self-definition and self-determination, breaking free from oppressive codes of conduct, Anzaldúa concludes that Chicanas must learn to distinguish between inherited, acquired, and imposed values (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 104).

The stories of La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona are particularly meaningful in this context, functioning as a collective code of symbols with social standards that define correct, incorrect, and desirable behaviors for Chicanas, reminding them what happens to women who go against the traditional norms. The patriarchal social discourse of Chicano/Mexicano culture constructs women's gender and sexuality according to these three archetypes. As Anzaldúa states, "the true identity of all three has been subverted—Guadalupe to make them docile and enduring, La Malinche to make them ashamed of their Indian side and La Llorona to make them long suffering people, all representations of the virgin/whore dichotomy" (*Coatlatlopeuh* 54). The urge to reformulate these myths is central in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, insofar as the author believes that legends and cultural symbols must be revised and used as tools to change disabling images and memories, replacing them with

self-affirming ones (*Making Face, Making Soul* xxvii), so that Chicanas are able to acquire alternative forms of knowledge and forge a new empowered female identity, that of the new mestiza. The retelling of myths to raise female self-awareness is addressed by Chicana artists in a similar way. Gaspar de Alba points out that “rather than the chaste virgin, the weeping mother, and the treacherous whore, La Lupita, La Llorona, and La Malinche are now configured as powerful icons of Chicana resistance to cultural hegemony and patriarchal domination” (*Chicano Art* 143).

La Virgen de Guadalupe is one of the most important religious icons of Mexicans and Chicanos, not only as a representation of their mixed blood, Indian and white, but also as an illustration of the ideal woman and her qualities: passivity, obedience, motherhood, silence, and altruism. For Mexicans, the “veneration of the Virgin transcends pure religiosity and has become equated with a sense of unselfish motherhood and positive national identity” (Cypess 6). For Chicanos, the Virgin, as a personification of the blending of the Catholic Virgin Mary and the Indian goddess Coatlicue, is not only a religious symbol, but also a political one, embodying their own cultural blending and resistance against the colonizer. Anzaldúa states that “Guadalupe is the symbol for ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos/mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess” (*Coatlatlopeuh* 52). Since the 1970s, Chicana artists have been portraying this figure as a feminist depiction of empowerment, aiming to retell the story in a different version with non-patriarchal notions of womanhood. For this very reason, their representations of the virgin commonly communicate a call to action and empowerment through body posture, referring to the Chicanas’ urge and ability to take charge of their lives.

In *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe* (1978), Lopéz replaces the traditional virgin for herself as a runner, holding a serpent in her hand, metaphorically representing assertive power through the rebirth of a new female identity as a consequence of transformation

and healing. The virgin is crushing an angel with red, white, and blue wings, alluding to the refusal of the traditional Anglo-American values of imperialism, patriarchy, and full assimilation. By depicting the virgin running, López questions the traditional image of Chicanas as passive subjects with no agency in their own lives. The image consequently suggests that Chicanas and other women can bring oppressive social codes to an end if they reformulate their female role models and use their creative life force to command their destiny.



Estér Hernández, *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos* [The Virgin of Guadalupe Defending the Rights of Chicanos]. 1975. Etching and aquatint. 38.1x27.9 cm. ©1975, Ester Hernandez

In *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos* (1975), Hernández depicts the virgin wearing a black-belt karategi, kicking vigorously at all forms of oppression that may affect Chicanas. The traditional passive image of La Virgen de Guadalupe is therefore subverted, and Hernández, like López, represents a strong, active virgin who leads Chicanas to question and defeat traditional conventions and find their new mestiza identity. Thus, both images represent the adoption of an empowering virgin figure as a positive female role model.



Estér Hernández, *La Virgen de Las Calles* [The Virgin of the Streets]. 2001. Pastel on paper.

111.7x76.2 cm. ©2001, Ester Hernandez

More recent images of La Virgen point out the limitations traditional stereotypes impose on common women. In *La Virgen de las Calles* (2001), Hernández replaces the preconceived, idealized figure by an ordinary Latin-American woman selling flowers in any street in the USA, in representation of all common immigrant women workers who also deserve respect and admiration. Moreover, the artist presents an image that Chicana feminists can easily relate to since it is distanced from male-oriented religious beliefs. As Cisneros points out: “for her to approach me, for me to finally open the door and accept her, she had to be a woman like me” (50). Hernández, therefore, pays tribute to the dignity, strength, and perseverance of Latin-American women who strive for a better life in the USA, claiming that “saintly” features can be found in every woman and not only in unattainable religious icons.

López, in *Lupe and Sirena in Love* (1999), reinterprets La Virgen as a lesbian, by subverting Guadalupe as a symbol of repressed sexuality and questioning the heteronormative practices of both cultures. Pérez suggests that the artist is particularly daring in giving visibility to lesbian sexual desire (176), as traditionally Chicana sexuality is ruled by the ideal of virginity and the denial of the body as a source of pleasure. The representation of the Virgin Mary as a lesbian thus challenges all the acceptable roles, especially those of mothers and wives as denounced by Anzaldúa: “For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute or to the home as a mother” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 39). Therefore, in this depiction, the virgin’s virtue is no longer male-defined, since virginity conceptually gives power to a male-controlled society, which objectifies women and perpetuates the virgin/whore dichotomy. López is not only claiming that homosexual relationships are also blessed by the divine, but is also alluding to the particularly transgressive connection between human desire and divine love (Latorre 135). Thus, López offers a new icon of devotion to the community of Chicana lesbians who cannot place themselves in the traditional heterosexual imagery. The representation of the “virgin as a lesbian

not only aesthetically resists extreme variations of gender oppression, but also raises further questions about how Chicanas inhabit their space in gendered and sexualized ways” (Pérez 176).

The artist places the virgin at the border in her representation of a fragmented and hybrid identity, metaphorically suggesting the possibility of renewal, rebirth, and identity reformulation through the butterfly image. Additionally, the butterfly also implies the hope women with indigenous roots might cherish when crossing geographical borders; a crossing Anzaldúa also describes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

La mojada, la mujer indocumentada [The wetback, undocumented woman], is doubly threatened in this country. Not only does she have to contend with sexual violence, but like all women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness. As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain. (34-35)

Like undocumented women who cross the border from Latin-America, Chicana lesbians are doubly threatened if they choose to leave the safety of Chicano cultural values to restore their self-determination and attain self-realization. Anzaldúa believes that “for the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 41). López’s image creates a spiritual space for lesbians in Chicano traditional symbolism, but it also “evokes the tactical ‘mobility’ of cultural practices, ideologies, and narratives as they move from one location, in Mexico, to another in the United States,” as Cristina Serna states (178).

López's *Lupe and Sirena in Love* as well as Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* highlight that the borderlands are a space of inclusion for all those who are marginalized by both cultures, including homosexual women. The innovation of Anzaldúa's borderlands concept is, in fact, its expansion to notions of gender and sexuality, since it not only implies the presence of a multiplicity of cultures sharing the same territory, but also the inclusion of those who are not accepted by the dominant society, may they be disabled people, homosexuals, or women. As a result, in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the concrete geopolitical space of the border is interrelated with its metaphorical concept, thus playing a crucial role in Anzaldúa's feminist epistemology.

The story of La Malinche operates analogously to that of La Virgen de Guadalupe, since it also reminds women that they are considered traitors and sinners if they refuse to conform to traditional roles. Sandra Cypess suggests that as descendants of the historical Malinche, "Chicanas identify with La Malinche's role or are likened to her by males who see them consorting with Anglos or accepting Anglo cultural patterns" (138). Malinche, the indigenous slave, mistress of the Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés, is commonly blamed for the conquest of the territory that came to be Mexico and is accused of betrayal. Although Malinche is usually represented as a prostitute who brings shame to every Chicano, Anzaldúa claims she is a scapegoat sustaining male power, punished not only for her active role as a translator during the conquest and for violating the female tradition of silence, but also for being used as a sexual object. She is raped and gives birth to an illegitimate child of the invader, becoming the mother of all mestizos: "The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer. . . . Not me sold out my people but they me. . . . The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 44). As Gaspar de Alba contends, "Chicano patriarchy continues to evoke La Malinche's name to malign Chicanas who refuse to conform to their prescribed biological functions" (*Unframing* 77).

Responding to Anzaldúa's call for myth reformulation, Chicana artist Santa Barraza represents La Malinche as a woman survivor who refuses to be a victim of the conquistadores and the Catholic priests responsible for killing and hanging indigenous peoples who did not conform. As an allusion to the cultural roots of the mestizos, in Malinche's cleavage, an embryo arises from a cactus, a prominent plant of the Mexican territory used as boundary markers that define borders between regions. Barraza's painting is a powerful metaphor of Chicanos' hybridity, as well as of their fragmented identity, of being torn between cultural systems.

Cacti were used for Aztec rituals and, for instance, sacrificing a victim atop a cactus was believed to help win benevolence from the Gods. In the painting, Malinche seems to be aware that to ensure her own and her son's survival, she will have to face a life between cultural paradigms, replete with sacrifices and pain. Malinche, who refused to be erased by the Spaniards, reminds Chicanas that they too can speak out, act, and resist the Anglo-Americans' as well as their own community's cultural colonization, even though it may be a challenging path to embark on. As Anzaldúa asserts: "[m]y identity is grounded in the Indian women's history of resistance" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 43).

In addition to the mythical figures of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche, the legend of La Llorona, the weeping woman, has traditionally been considered a powerful tool to control Chicanas' conduct. Like La Malinche's narrative, La Llorona's story also has different versions depending on the country or the region where it is told. A common thread is that after marrying and having children, this woman was betrayed by her husband, as a consequence of which she went insane: she blames the children for the marriage failure and therefore drowns them in a river, albeit instantly regretting it. The story of La Llorona "at one point, became conflated with the image of La Malinche because they share the loss of their children" (Cypess 7). Oral narratives also tell that a weeping woman, dressed in white, wanders along the banks of rivers, kidnapping children or scaring those who are disobedient. Hence, these narratives are

used to control women and remind them of what happens if they refuse the traditional norms, urging them not to complain but place their husband's and children's needs and desires above their own. As Alejandra Elenes points out:

The most conventional narrative of La Llorona reproduces traditional values such as obedience and responsibility: children should obey their parents; fathers should not drink and leave their families; women should accept traditional notions of womanhood and sexuality. Any deviation of these norms will result in catastrophe, particularly the death of children. (70)

For Anzaldúa, inasmuch as for Chicana artists, La Llorona embodies the struggle of ordinary women for equal social roles, defying patriarchal narratives of womanhood: “The Aztec female rites of mourning were rites of defiance protesting the cultural changes which disrupted the equality and balance between female and male. . . . Like la Llorona, the Indian woman's only means of protest was wailing” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 43). Alicia's mural, *La Llorona's Sacred Waters* (2004), subverts the oral storytelling by the representation of La Llorona saving and protecting children from turbulent waters, thus reconfiguring the story into a positive female version. Water, a sacred element in Alicia's mural, symbolizes fertility and the origin of life, as well as the ability of women to give birth and protect the next generation, ensuring the continuity of communities.

La Llorona Desperately Seeking Coyolxauhqui (2003) by López depicts a distressed young woman, personifying all the young women and girls violently killed in the border city of Ciudad Juarez in the last decades, the “modern-day Coyolxauhquis in Juárez” (Gaspar de Alba and Guzman 18). These victims “left mothers desperate to find them, wailing like Lloronas at the indifferent desert to bring their daughter home” (*Unframing* 172). The artist makes visible

the violence against women perpetuated by traditional stereotypes, employing the name of the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui in the title, who was sacrificed—decapitated, cut into pieces and buried in different places by one of her brothers, Huitzilopochtli. Coyolxauhqui not only illustrates the modus operandi of some of these killings, but also metaphorically suggests women's search for healing, self-definition, and self-determination. It employs the symbols adopted by Anzaldúa to represent the Chicanas' process of individual healing that enables them to rebuild their fragmented identity, "putting Coyolxauhqui together": "Coyolxauhqui personifies the wish to repair and heal, as well as rewrite stories of loss and recovery, exile and homecoming, disinheritance and recuperation, stories that lead you out of passivity into agency, out of devalued into valued lives" (*Light in the Dark* 143). Furthermore, Serna proposes that Coyolxauhqui, "as a female warrior who was killed by her brother, is also used by Chicanas to present a critique of patriarchal betrayals within Mexican and Chicano cultures" (176).

When Anzaldúa and the aforementioned artists insist that Chicanas have to reformulate the stories of La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona in the process of reconstructing their own (hi)stories, they claim not only that Chicanas must refuse oppressive patterns of female behavior, but also proclaim their right to a hybrid experience and reality: their right to transform oppressive experiences into forms of resistance, and, consequently, to act upon their lives. The retelling of these stories will enable the emergence of a new female identity of the borderlands that will succeed in turning oppression into a source of power, which in turn will reconstruct female identities. Anzaldúa calls this new woman the "new mestiza," who incarnates a multiple system insofar as she inhabits opposing worlds due to her gender, sexuality, color, class, body, personality, belief, or life experience. Nonetheless, the new mestiza finds a balance in this paradigm of ambiguities, "she learns to juggle cultures. She has plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad,

the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 101). Anzaldúa, however, does not exclude Anglo-Americans from this new female identity:

What is happening, after years of colonization, is that all the divides disappear a little bit because the colonizer, in his or her interaction with the colonized, takes on a lot of their attributes. And, of course, the person who is colonizing leaks into our stuff. So we are neither one or the other; we are really both; there is not a pure other; there is not a pure subject and not a pure object. We are implicated in each other's lives. (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 243)

The in-betweenness of the mestiza—resulting from her identifying simultaneously with the oppressor and the oppressed—will allow her to mediate, negotiate, and navigate different locations. Hence, for the author, female miscegenation can be turned into a tool for freedom.

The purpose of social commitment

The visual artists Anzaldúa and Chicana appeal to an alliance among women of the Chicano community, calling for female cooperation as a means of overcoming their triple oppression. In Anzaldúa's view, Chicanas must develop an approach based on social activism to forge an inclusive system, establishing coalitions with the Other, as well as recognizing the existence of commonalities instead of differences (*This Bridge* 2). The new mestiza is the personification of this theory of inclusion, as she will be able to promote relational tactics as a key to personal and social liberation, helping other Chicanas with their identity reconfigurations. Valuable existential knowledge acquired by the borderlands experience enables the new mestiza to assume a tolerant and global perspective of society through feeling motivated to create a new set of principles for an inclusive reality, and, thereafter, to promote

social evolution and change. As Anzaldúa specifies: “As a *mestiza* . . . I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images that connect us to each other and to the planet” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 103). Accordingly, in a future free of gender oppression and social segregation the author envisions, the new *mestiza* will have the role of mediator between different experiences, as well as between old and new paradigms: “*En unas pocas centurias* [In a few centuries], the future will belong to the *mestiza*. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms . . . creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 102).

Chicana artists also address the importance of female alliance and social commitment, since art functions “as a vehicle in which new ideologies are constructed and particular worldviews and identities can be lived and reproduced” (Mesa-Bains 305). This message is conveyed in López’s *Ixta* (1999), in which the artist depicts two young women of the Chicano community in the popular Pietà pose: one personifies the Virgin and the other adopts the Christ figure lying down on the US-Mexico border wall, metaphorically indicating the sacrifice and pain that result from the multilayered discrimination of the border context. The picture alludes not only to the socially unacceptable lesbian love among Chicanas, but also to the power of Chicana sisterhood as a means of social activism, replicating Anzaldúa’s vision of women healing and saving each other in a female coalition. Above the two young lesbians, the image of the Mexican volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl evokes the legend of the tragic non-consummated love between an Aztec princess and a warrior. Likewise, details of *The World Wall: A Vision of the Future Without Fear* (1990), namely the panel “Nonviolent Resistance” depicts the alliance of Chicanas resisting oppression side by side with the men of their community, fostering an equalitarian and peaceful future. In this representation, principles of

nonviolence as well as the idea of community awareness become the basis of the social transformation needed to forge a new system.

When Anzaldúa claims that all Chicanas can become new mestizas, she compels them to search for female models in their own cultural heritage. The adoption of empowering figures of Latin-American resistance is an explicit statement in Santa Barraza's *Retablo of Soldaderas con Virgencita* [Altarpiece of Women Soldiers with Little Virgin] (1992) and López's *Las Four* [The Four] (1997). Barraza's work portrays two soldaderas (female soldiers) symbolizing many women who fought in the Mexican revolution under the protection of La Virgen de Guadalupe. "Through their participation in the war, these soldaderas were deservedly liberated from cultural norms and achieved equality in ways that went beyond the ideals of the Revolution" (Fernández 57), consequently they were able to escape from patriarchal notions of womanhood and challenge the traditional stereotypes of passivity and submission. The Virgin by their side both supports them in their quest and reassures them that attaining equality means neither a religious nor a cultural betrayal of their communities. Choosing to portray these strong women fighters, with hands on hips and guns, the artist empowers Chicanas to fight for equal rights with no "fear of going home and not being taken in" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 42), specifically no fear of rejection in case they choose not to conform to the values traditionally imposed. As Santa Barraza asserts: "empowered images intervene and speak . . . these images then transform themselves and communicate in a new and profound manner . . . then [it all] becomes a reality" (49).

Las Four by López depicts four young women sitting on their front steps together, supporting each other in the many challenges of their lives, thus creating a Chicana community as a sisterhood. They are protected by four notable female figures of Latin-American culture: Dolores Huerta, the cofounder of the United Farm Workers; the seventeenth-century Mexican writer Sor Juana de la Cruz, recognized as Latin America's first feminist poet; a soldadera; and

Rigoberta Menchú, the Guatemalan civil rights activist, who won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1992. The presence of the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui above them implies the continuous healing process and identity reconfigurations Chicanas have to endure in their search for their true selves with cultural roots in the pre-conquest period.

The concrete actions designed to intervene and transform the social conditions of subordinate communities are forms of “Spiritual Activism,” as Anzaldúa suggests (*This Bridge* 572). The evolution of human beings requires an awareness of life both as spiritual and material, as well as the understanding that borders offer opportunities for personal growth through self-reflection and empathy with the Other. This is a path that will lead to the social change Anzaldúa conceptualizes: “I change myself, I change the world” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 92). In this context, Anzaldúa and Chicana artists not only make their strong purpose of social commitment evident, but also embrace the new mestiza, acting upon society through their writings/visual art, while introducing the women of their community from an empowering female perspective free of traditional and oppressive codes. For both writers and artists, being a Chicana is a political statement deeply rooted in their feminist consciousness.

To conclude, well-evidenced parallels can be drawn between Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Chicana visual artists’ works: they dismiss received notions of nationalism and cultural identity; claim both their indigenous and Mexican heritage, and their “adopted” American culture without choosing a monolithic perspective; deconstruct and reconstruct the patriarchal discourse imposed on them by the different cultures they inhabit; analyze and reformulate female myths and figures, revising images normally used to control women, converting them into representations of empowering feminine practices; call for female cooperation as a means of overcoming their triple oppression; and finally, they are inspired by powerful icons of Latin-American resistance. Chicana art is, like Anzaldúa’s texts, oriented by a feminist commitment to a community-based activism. With a purpose of community education and evolution,

Anzaldúa and Chicana artists use their work as a form of social activism, presenting alternative paths for common Chicana women and envisioning a future free from oppressive traditional roles and values. In their own lives and works, Anzaldúa and Chicana artists, alike, highlight the possibility of transforming conditions of marginality and exploitation into individual and collective empowerment.

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