



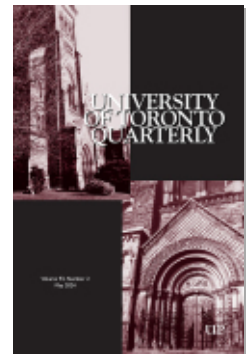
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Self-Change as Global Change: Spiritual Activism and Its Place in Gloria Anzaldúa's Legacy

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ABSTRACT: This article looks at Gloria Anzaldúa's under-explored and posthumously published work *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, which marks important developments for Anzaldúa's legacy and philosophy, and is a culmination of her thoughts concerning identity, spirituality, aesthetics, ethics, ontology, and metaphysics. This work's cornerstone concept, "spiritual activism," provides activists with a radical new means of resistance that attempts to dismantle systemic oppressions that enable separatisms such as racism, sexism, classism, speciesism, homophobia, transphobia, patriarchy, and even environmental degradation. In envisioning these social and ecological injustices as interconnected and intersectional phenomena, spiritual activism amalgamates spiritual technologies with political forms of activism. Spiritual activism views self-change as a means of global change in and of itself, making this connection more robust, visible, and explicit for Anzaldúa's readership. It formulates a new metaphysics of interconnectedness with others, animals, and the earth itself in new ontological matrices that disrupt the cultural hegemony of Eurocentric, Anglocentric, and western cultures. Anzaldúa's last work develops new forms of resistance via the critical and constant (re)shaping of our identity formations and ontological categories to make positive social change and global justice its highest priority.

KEYWORDS: Gloria Anzaldúa, spiritual activism, spirituality, systemic oppression, social change, identity formations

You become reacquainted with a reality called spirit, a presence, force, power, and energy within and without. Spirit infuses all that exists—organic and inorganic—transcending the categories and concepts that govern your perception of material reality. – Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark* (137)

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INTRODUCTION

Gloria E. Anzaldúa's work crosses many borders among academic disciplines. She is read in postcolonial studies, women's studies, gender studies, queer studies, Indigenous studies, Chicanx and Latinx studies, social and political theory, feminist theory, critical theory, and philosophy, among other disciplines. Diverse scholars across the humanities have employed Anzaldúa's theories to discuss a variety of issues and topics such as social justice in education and pedagogy (Elenes), Chicanx and gender studies (Lara), women of colour in academia (Castillo-Garsow), Mexican art and social movements (McCaughan), Latinx studies (Ortega), and even performative art (Andrade and Gutierrez-Perez). While Anzaldúa is primarily known for her canonical text *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which undertakes a postcolonial analysis of oppression using a Third World Latina feminist lens, I focus on her final and posthumously published book *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. This is not to say that *Borderlands* plays no lasting role in Anzaldúa's overall philosophy. In fact, Anzaldúa continues to explore many themes that build on the more well-known ideas presented in *Borderlands*, using a Chicanx feminist lens to analyze gender, race, colonialism, and identity, all stemming from her semi-autobiographical take as a woman of colour in academia.

Indeed, Anzaldúa's last major work comes to theoretical conclusions that can be traced back to some of her key notions in *Borderlands*, stated early in its preface, that "the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other . . . where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy," and her thinking on one's ever-shifting and multiplicitous identity among splitting and numerous "borderlands," best illustrated by her concept of a "new mestiza consciousness" (99). Expanding on this, Anzaldúa's theories begin to include and focus on our global condition, our relationalities with others and the entire planetary body, and the ways in which one's identity relates to, and interacts with, the dynamic whole, including all identity categories and the natural environment and the lands we occupy. In *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa suggests that we need to (re)consider the fundamental relationships that we have with ourselves, others, the environment, and the planet itself if we are to change our worldviews, actions, and realities.

I argue that we should consider *Light in the Dark* and its core concept of "spiritual activism" as important cornerstones that help us to better understand and appreciate Anzaldúa's overall philosophy and impactful legacy. Using spiritual activism as this article's methodological foundation, I claim that its main directive is the bringing about of positive social transformation by seeing self-change as a means of global change in and of itself that gives us a radical means of resistance through identity (re)formations. In this light, we are given a new procedure for activism and social change that is more robust, visible, and explicit about the ways self-change and global change interact in complex and seemingly unknown or hidden ways – the grounding premise of spiritual activism as I see it. I aim to highlight this active

interrelationality to understand spiritual activism's critical, pragmatic, and transformative methodology and praxis. This demonstrates spiritual activism's mission of effecting positive social change alongside a recognition of its increasing importance in Anzaldúa's very salient corpus of work for twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical thought.

ACCOUNTING FOR SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM IN ANZALDÚA'S LATE WORKS

As vital as *Borderlands* is for tracing and understanding Anzaldúa's theories, life experience, and philosophy, her last work suggests a fundamental shift and continued evolution in her thinking, especially concerning her use and understanding of spirituality and social activism. This shift in Anzaldúa's work could steer part of the conversation away from critically analyzing racial, cultural, sexual, ethnic, and geographical borderlands, and towards spiritual, global, emotional, psychic, and conscious/unconscious borderlands (Anzaldúa and Keating, *Interviews* 7). In *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa builds on her earlier idea of "la mestiza consciousness" as she develops a new set of dynamic concepts such as "nepantla," "conocimiento," "new tribalism," "nos/otras," "The Coyolxauhqui Imperative," and my conceptual focus, "spiritual activism."

Light in the Dark was Anzaldúa's unfinished doctoral dissertation written at the University of California, Santa Cruz (Keating, "Editor's Introduction" xviii–xix).¹ It explores knowledge production as it is inflected and shaped by social justice issues, identity (trans)formation, and healing (i). Throughout the text, she uses her life experiences as examples of the process of change, trying to capture her transformative philosophy through the written word. Anzaldúa's writing is the result of her attempt to transform herself and articulate her ever-changing sense of identity and perceptual reality, experimenting with content and form (xii) and challenging conventional procedures, genres, academic disciplines, and standardized writing processes (xiv). She however explores these ideas with a consistently spiritual lens.

1 In the introduction, AnaLouise Keating, its editor, notes that Anzaldúa herself said that this work was several months away from being completed in an email exchange with her committee chair before her untimely death due to complications of diabetes. Chapters 1, 3, 5, and 6 were already published in other work; Chapter 6 was published in her own anthological work, *this bridge we call home* (Anzaldúa and Keating). Likewise, Anzaldúa was given the option of using segments of *Borderlands* and other completed works for her PhD dissertation. She however rejected this option, stating that others in the program had to write dissertations from scratch, and it would be unfair and a disservice to them. What's important is that Anzaldúa herself felt her dissertation was nearly complete, which does not take away from the extraordinary editorial work done by AnaLouise Keating. This rather showcases the intact originality and near-completion status of Anzaldúa's thoughts present in this book, despite it being posthumously published.

Anzaldúa's conceptualization and centralization of spirituality is at the heart of many of her theories and has yet to be adequately addressed. The secondary literature on Anzaldúa's spirituality and its role in her philosophy, when it does make the connections, does not yet do so in a way that fully appreciates its importance. AnaLouise Keating, who meticulously edited *Anzaldúa's* final text and worked closely with her, contends it is what intricately connects Anzaldúa's epistemology, ethics, politics, metaphysics, and ontology, the combination of which drastically differs from other modern conceptions of spirituality (x). Michelle R. Martin-Baron similarly notes that

[s]pirituality runs throughout Anzaldúa's *oeuvre*, but is not often remarked upon in academic engagements with her work. Importantly, there's no escaping spirituality when engaging with *Light in the Dark*, as it runs as a key theme in all of the chapters. ... Part prayer and part philosophical treatise, Anzaldúa emphasizes the centrality of spirituality not only for her own work, but for her broader work of healing a broken world. (624–25)

Martin-Baron also illustrates the importance of spirituality in Anzaldúa's works and describes her last text as an important cornerstone in her oeuvre that speaks broadly across women's studies, philosophy, politics, Chicanx and Latinx studies, border studies, native studies, sexuality studies, and beyond (624–25).

To be clear, though, Anzaldúa rejects "new age" or popularized forms of twenty-first-century spirituality in which one solely focuses on the personal or individual self, thus limiting one's concerns to one's own well-being or prosperity without considering larger social, communal, environmental, and global injustices and forms of oppression (*Light* 246). Part of Anzaldúa's legacy and life project involves critiquing and addressing social, racial, gender, sexual, ethnic, and class injustices perpetrated by western-Anglo ideology and culture and the epistemic injustices² and intellectual barriers that preclude the theorization and practice of spirituality and other ways of seeing and relating to oneself, others, the planet, and reality itself. She thereby opens paths to considering spirituality anew. Robert Guitierrez-Perez likewise perceives that "*Light in the Dark* is a bright and shining beacon for scholars, activists, and practitioners searching for a comprehensive philosophy of personal and social transformation ... every breath feels like an act of resistance" (307). *Light in the Dark* is, first and foremost, a call to action, and it, along with its spiritual activism, should be recognized and appreciated when considering Anzaldúa's lifelong project of decolonization and social justice. But what exactly is

2 This notion is taken from Fricker. Epistemic injustice, or testimonial or hermeneutical injustice, refers to the ways in which someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower, wronged in a capacity essential to human value. Spiritual activism, moreover, operates in a way that attempts to dismantle epistemic injustices while opening the door to other ways of knowing and interacting with the world.

spiritual activism, and how does it contribute to her legacy and positive social transformation?

Anzaldúa defines it as the fusion of spiritual practices with political activism. She states that

[i]n trying to make sense of what's happening, some of us come into deep awareness (*conocimiento*) of political and spiritual situations and the unconscious mechanisms that abet hate, intolerance, and discord. . . . *Conocimiento* urges us to respond not just with the traditional practices of spirituality (contemplation, meditation, and private rituals) or with the technologies of political activism (protests, demonstrations, and speakouts), but with the amalgam of the two: spiritual activism. (*Light* 19)

Spiritual activism, guided by *conocimiento* or deep awareness, pushes us to engage in spiritual practices combined with traditional forms of political activism in order to confront our social sickness with new tools and goals. Its aim is to effect a psycho-spiritual-political-material shift. Spiritual activism reinvents traditional spirituality that tends to focus on otherworldly or non-material matters, often associated with esoteric topics, paranormal activity, and religious subjects. Without discounting traditional spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, sermons, private rituals, contemplation, and so on, spiritual activism repurposes these actions to include and activate political dimensions, inciting them to embrace broader objectives of social justice. In other words, we immerse ourselves in traditional spiritual and self-care practices to become better individuals and social activists, and not simply to enhance our own lives. It redirects these spiritual practices toward new political directives.

Anzaldúa further elaborates upon spiritual activism while criticizing new age spiritualities:

Most contemporary spiritual practitioners in this country ignore the political implications and do not concern themselves with our biggest problems and challenges: racism and other racial abuses. They're not concerned with violence against children and women, with poverty and the attacks against nature. I describe the activist stance that explores spirituality's social implications as "spiritual activism" – an activism that is engaged by a diverse group of people with different practices. (*Light* 19)

Unlike new age spirituality, spiritual activism engages large socio-political issues such as racism, sexism, classism, violence against women and children, and even environmental degradation. Spiritual activism diversifies old spiritual traditions and customs and uses pragmatic, critical, and transformative theoretical models and frameworks to undo contemporary injustices. What most importantly differentiates spiritual activism from traditional spiritual practices is its innovative, ever-changing, and dynamic conception

of identity that politicizes spiritual practices by conjoining them with cultural identities, localized communities, and global mo(ve)ments. It recognizes the deep interplay between ourselves and larger social, natural, and cultural systems and sees problems such as racism, sexism, gender discrimination, classism, capitalism, and ecological destabilization as intimately interconnected, intersectional issues and phenomena. Spiritual activism observes that the world, society, individual, and culture are always in compositional and decompositional states with the hope of bringing about positive social change (43). Thus, in contrast to new age spiritualities, positive social change or the undoing of contemporary systemic injustices becomes the objective for spiritual activists; this idea is reflected in Anzaldúa's comprehensive philosophy and continued thinking about spirituality.

THE EVOLUTION OF SPIRITUALITY IN ANZALDÚA'S THEORIZATIONS

The difficulty of practicing spiritual activism, however, is not to be underestimated. Christopher D. Tirres suggests that *Light in the Dark* offers important clues about the intricacies of Anzaldúa's spiritual vision and practice (51). He argues that the articulation of spiritual activism in this text helps to clarify her conflicting stances on spiritual realism – that is, the view that there exists a metaphysically and objectively real spiritual reality. Tirres points out that the question “Are spirits real?” has troubled Anzaldúa and has constituted a recurring theme in her work throughout her career (51). He then outlines two positions that Anzaldúa commonly ascribed to before this text's publication: a realist position, which assumes that spirits are real and metaphysically exist, and a pluralist position, which assumes that spirits are both literally and imaginatively real. While *Light in the Dark* echoes both positions, it offers a third functionalist and pragmatic option that sets Anzaldúa's understanding of spirituality and social activism in a new light (51). Tirres correctly points out that Anzaldúa is mostly concerned with whether spiritual journeys and experiences make positive changes in a person's life. He argues that this third functionalist position best meshes with Anzaldúa's underlying commitment to spiritual activism as a form of praxis, therefore escaping the cul-de-sacs and theoretical pitfalls of spiritual metaphysical realism (52).

The main questions that *Light in the Dark* asks, according to Tirres, are: In what ways do our bodies, not just our minds, know? How can intuitions, dreams, feelings be valid forms of knowledge? And, most importantly, in what ways can knowledge be creatively used to bring about social transformation (54)? Anzaldúa affirms that “[t]hrough creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself. To understand the greater reality that lies behind your personal perceptions, you view these struggles as spiritual understandings” (*Light* 119).

This “larger frame of reference” gives us insight into the greater reality that lies behind our individual epistemologies, experiences, and ontologies, thus broadening their scope to social, communal, environmental, and global concerns, deepening our understanding of the reality of our situation, and ushering in new ways of being in the world (Tirres 55). This widening is at the heart of Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism, and distinguishes it from the aforementioned new age approach.

Anzaldúa’s understanding of spirituality not only matures significantly over the course of her career but also continues to be marked by certain unresolved philosophical tensions and competing ideas of spirituality. Tirres explicates these lingering tensions by examining Anzaldúa’s early writings and ideas about spirituality which imply that she approached spirituality in terms of discreet paranormal and out-of-body experiences and out-of-the-ordinary events, drawing largely on her own spiritual experiences (55). In some early and revealing interviews, Anzaldúa describes events in which she “sees spirits,” experiences feelings of immobilization during meditation, and connects her “multiple selves” through orgasm (55). In another telling interview with AnaLouise Keating, Anzaldúa is directly asked whether or not she believes in extraterrestrial spirits: “Don’t you think it’s going to make you less respectable and less reputable – because a lot of scholars don’t believe in such things?” Anzaldúa rebelliously remarks: “Tough shit! Once I get past my own censorship of what I should write about, I don’t care what other people say. Some things were hard for me to reveal but my strong vocation for writing makes me more open. To be a writer means to communicate” (Anzaldúa and Keating, *Interviews* 17). Anzaldúa is not afraid to speak about extraterrestrial spirits and her direct belief in them. However, she is ultimately more interested in openness and communication. She cares about sharing personal experiences, especially censored experiences deemed incredulous and inappropriate, while contesting forms of epistemic injustices in western academies. But we are still left with the question of how we, her readers, are to assess such claims and dimensions of her work.

How do statements and beliefs in spiritual realism and extraterrestrial spirits reconcile with other aspects of her work, such as social activism, Chicana studies, and decolonialism? Tirres surmises that Anzaldúa’s decision to share her spiritual experiences presents an important challenge to traditional academic disciplines that tend to distance themselves from studies of esotericism and paranormal experiences (56). Anzaldúa seems to support the idea that spirits are objectively real, and Tirres notes that, written decades later, *Light in the Dark* still presents the quandary of “Are spirits real?” Again, Anzaldúa directly responds: “I’ve been asked this question many times and each time the question takes me back to my childhood when I learned, witnessing las curanderas de mi mama grande, that the physical world is not the only reality” (*Light* 58). Her belief in *curanderismos* (those able to access spiritual reality in order to heal) and the metaphysical reality

of spirits indicates her ongoing belief in spirits and a spiritual world. Yet she interestingly has pragmatic and transformative responses to questions on the topic:

Does it matter whether the journey comes from a waking dream, the unconscious in symbolic representation, or a nonordinary parallel world? Who cares, as long as the information (whether metaphorical or literal) gained from a shamanic journey makes positive changes in a person's life. We must avoid the snares of literalism. Are spirits literally present or are they imaginably present? They are both. (59)

As Tirres realizes, this response is significant because it reveals Anzaldúa's interest in finding and offering others new interpretive pathways that avoid metaphysical literalism, narrow new age accounts of spirituality, and unproductive lingerings over philosophical tensions. Instead of considering spirits, dreams, and shamanic journeying as either imaginative fictions or objective realities – spiritual pluralism or spiritual realism – Anzaldúa, as Tirres notes, argues for this functionalist and pragmatic outlook in which what matters most is how these ideas work in practice and how they effect “positive changes in a person's life.” In other words, Tirres determines that a strong case can be made for the centring of praxis in Anzaldúa's concept of spirituality and spiritual activism. He specifies that, “[a]lthough ontological musings about the reality of spirits pepper many of her writings, in *Light in the Dark* one can see a clear pattern emerge in her line of thinking that culminates in the primacy of praxis.” He goes on to claim that “Anzaldúa's spiritual activism points to a more functionalist and pragmatic approach to spirituality ... [a] spirituality that is concerned with the *effects* of spirituality rather than its primary *causes*” (60).

Anzaldúa's spiritual activism then is most concerned with the effects of its practice and with bringing about positive personal and social change over substantiating or excessive philosophizing about metaphysical claims in unuseful ways. She emphasizes that spiritual activism “pushes us into engaging the spirit in confronting social sickness with new tools and practices whose goal is to *effect* a shift” (Anzaldúa, *Light* 19; emphasis added). Like Tirres, I recognize the functionalist, pragmatic, and transformative objectives in her growing spiritual vision, which result in a new metaphysical outlook that challenges traditional western identity formations and sees the world as an interconnected network in which our actions and modes of being play a role.

SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM POSITS A METAPHYSICS OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS

In order to enable the functionalist, pragmatic, and transformative objectives of spiritual activism, Anzaldúa theorizes a new metaphysics that opposes

exclusion. Its vision of a new connected world contemplates a radically inclusive politics built on alliances and what AnaLouise Keating calls a “metaphysics of interconnectedness”³ among all materialities and realities, both human and non-human (qtd. in Anzaldúa, *Light* 246). This metaphysics of interconnectedness seeks to destabilize and decolonize the traditional and oppressive aspects of ontological structures such as race, gender, nationalism, sex, class, and so on. As Robyn Henderson-Espinoza notes, Anzaldúa’s relational worldview aims to materialize a world in which we act on our interconnectedness and mediate the in-between spaces of the potentially infinite relationships that we have with ourselves, others, nature, and the planet itself (116). According to Keating, spiritual activism is “interweaving the personal with the collective,” an “ethics of interconnectivity” that is a “completely embodied, highly political endeavour” that seeks to decolonize systemic oppressions (Keating, “Editor’s Introduction” xxiii–xxiv). We can thus see how far-reaching and efficacious Anzaldúa’s final work and concepts are.

Throughout *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa illustrates this process by using her own experiences and inner dialogue about global events as opportunities for self- and collective reflections and re-evaluations. She describes the ways in which global structures influence identity, actions, and social injustice, and offers a concrete example of spiritual activism’s critical stance against systemic oppressions by portraying the ways in which the individual and the world interconnect in ontological and material ways: “As I see it, this country’s [United States] real battle is with its shadow – its racism, propensity for violence, rapacity for consuming, neglect of its responsibility to global communities and the environment, and unjust treatment of dissenters and the disenfranchised, especially people of color” (10). She goes on to challenge those situated in the United States individually and collectively by exposing shadows or modes of being that cause harm to others and the environment. She recognizes the ways in which we are individually complicit and responsible. She calls out the US military industrial complex and war-to-profit mongers that sponsored the “war on terror,” and used the death of victims of 9/11 to re-establish control of the Middle East and exploit its natural gas and oil reserves, which continue to power cars and produce the energy needed to run cities (13). She condemns US corporations that thrive on a war economy, imperialism, environmental degradation, and globalization (14). And she places some of the burden of responsibility on individuals – US citizens – who willfully remain mis- or uninformed and refuse

3 In “Editor’s Introduction: Re-Envisioning Coyolxauhqui, Decolonizing Reality Anzaldúa’s Twenty-First-Century Imperative” in *Light in the Dark*, AnaLouise Keating explains how she coined this term to describe Anzaldúa’s metaphysics (ix). Keating first developed the term in “Risking the Personal: An Introduction,” in Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Keating’s *Interviews/Entrevistas*. She further elaborates on the idea more fully in “I’m a Citizen of the Universe.”

to acknowledge and act on global injustices propagated by US and western ideology, culture, and lifestyles.

Anzaldúa, moreover, emphasizes how the spaces and ways in which we live have led, and will continue to lead, to catastrophes that sustain violence and exploitation. She is writing from her own embodied and lived experiences of 9/11 and neocolonial globalization, which she sees as involving growing disparity between First World and Third World countries, and buttressed by US imperialism and western identity formations. She criticizes over- and hyper-consumption that leads to violence and the theft of natural resources. While using George Bush and his administration as exemplars that perpetuate *deconocimiento* (ignorance) and oppressive power structures, she asserts that

[t]hey [the Bush administration] refuse el conocimiento (spiritual knowledge) that we're interconnected by invisible fibers to everyone on the planet, and that each person's actions affect the rest of the world. Putting gas in our cars connects us to the Middle East. Take a shower squandering water and someone on the planet goes thirsty; waste food and someone starves to death. Although we make up approximately 4.5% of the people on the planet, we consume 82 percent of its resources. And fear, ignorance, greed, overconsumption, and a voracious appetite for power is what this war is about. (15)

Anzaldúa sees global problems as intimately interlinked "by invisible fibers," thus suggesting the obvious and the not-so-obvious ways in which we connect with everyone on the planet – that each person's actions affect the rest of the world. She critiques the modern economic and spatial order organized by (neo)coloniality and US and western expansion highlighting the interplay between individual acts and global movements and moments. Waste food and someone dies of starvation. Squander water and someone dies of thirst. Use oil and someone is harmed in the Middle East. Discard hazardous wastes such as plastics and someone develops cancer from its carcinogenic effects. Consume meat and an animal is slaughtered. In this worldview we are all connected, and all actions contribute to global forces in some way. For Anzaldúa, we first need to recognize these modes of being that comprise our own western identity formations. We do so to understand our own complicity and to reframe these objectives through spiritual contexts.

Spiritual activism, as conveyed by Anzaldúa, then, defines its process as the ability to expand on our notions of who we think we are and the way to positive social transformation. It asks us to build upon and apply all that we learn to our daily activities and to our relationship with ourselves, others, and nature (Anzaldúa, *Light* 91). For Anzaldúa, when we consciously enter into the subjunctive form – this "as if" mode of thinking – then these words and ideas can make a genuine difference in our moral lives. Consequently, spiritual activism leads to new organizations and organizing principles, a

new order, a new mode of being, a new means of relating to our communities, and rejection of systemic oppression derived from hegemonic modern culture (92).

Unfortunately, most of the scholarship about Anzaldúa's work has so far neglected or overlooked the implications of her practice and theorizations of spirituality (Tirres 61), but recent scholarship is shedding more light on these interconnected issues (Santos, Urquijo-Ruiz, and Cantú). For instance, in *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women's Lives*, an anthology that incorporates different genres of writing including poetry, testimonials, critical essays, and historical analysis, contributors engage spirituality in a critical, personal, and creative way while arguing that spirituality is a necessary component of an alternative political agenda focused on equitable social and ecological change (Facio and Lara). As Ines Hernandez-Avila indicates in the foreword, "Chicana/Latina/Indigenous women's spirituality, the fleshing of the spirit and the spiriting of the flesh, are linked intrinsically to social, environmental and global justice, to the well-being of us as women, to our communities and all of life, to all of our relations" (xiv). With spirituality at the forefront, these authors participate in critical dialogue and social activism that illuminate the ways to social change and the ability to live in harmony with life's universal energies, while building on the supposition that spirituality often plays a decolonizing role in creating meaning, inspiring action, and supporting healing and justice in our communities through focus on liberation and social equity (3). The book attempts to theorize the radical interconnection between women of colour, spirituality, and social activism, and adopts a "spiritual activist" worldview that is active and promotes and sustains action and social justice (10). Before transformative political work can be done, we must recognize that our spiritual need is a desire to understand our relations with others, and they pay direct credit to Anzaldúa and her work in spiritual activism (xv, 3, 6).

THE HEART OF SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM: SELF-CHANGE AND IDENTITY (TRANS)FORMATION

Spiritual activism attempts to focus on commonalities while simultaneously validating the differences among various identities, cultures, and social systems. As Anzaldúa states in *Borderlands*, "I change myself, I change the world" – an important thought that she develops in her last work (70). That is, in order to create positive change or to break down systemic oppression, we need to first be the change we would like to see in the world and reconceptualize our identity formations, intellectually strengthening Gandhi's well-known, but often misquoted, dictum.⁴ Anzaldúa suggests that, to create positive social change, one must paradoxically go

inward and reconfigure oneself to alter the outer structure of reality – that we mirror the world and, by changing ourselves, “the tendencies in the world would also change” (Gandhi 158). AnaLouise Keating acknowledges Anzaldúa’s constructive imaginary and socio-political tactic here, enabling a two-way movement in which self-change leads to global change and vice versa, resulting in productive and transformative insights by ruminating on this interactive and reciprocal juxtaposition.

According to Keating in the introduction to *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa theorizes that the spiritual, material, physical, and psychical are inseparable aspects of a unified and infinitely complex reality (xxx). To see these interconnections requires imagination – how inner activity and body and outer community and space coalesce. As Anzaldúa states, “[m]y text is about imagination . . . we are connected to el cenote via the individual and collective arbol de la vida, and our images and ensueños emerge from that connection, from the self-in-community (inner, spiritual, nature/animals, racial/ethnic, communities of interest, neighborhood, city, nation, planet, galaxy, and the unknown universe)” (*Light* 5). Anzaldúa is asking her audience to envisage for themselves the unknown ways in which we are interconnected on a social, communal, national, natural, planetary, and even cosmic scale. She is intrigued by and interested in “dreaming” and in the making of images to analyse problems and blockages, foretell current and future events, and actively establish under-explored and hidden connections between lived experiences and theory (5). Anzaldúa is exploring previously unrealized links that bridge and unite selves with others, lived experiences with theories, the known with the unknown, and, most importantly, self-change with global change.

For Anzaldúa, our inner psyches and affective configurations are shaped by borderlands, by oppressive social and material conditions. In many of her works, Anzaldúa catalogues her autobiographical experiences of growing up as a Chicana, such as the suffering, guilt, and silencing depicted in her eminent chapter “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” in *Borderlands*: “To be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we’ll see there. *Pena*. Shame. Low estimation of self. In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives” (58). Anzaldúa thus speaks to the ways in which colonial and oppressive social and linguistic circumstances lead to feelings of shame, censorship, and alienation that mirror our external world. Yet *la mestiza* embraces her own

- 4 “We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do.” (158).

Chicana language, and has positive ramifications for herself and Chicanas as a social group, thereby directly enabling new senses of culture, community, and self/social relationality. She transforms her sense of self and retorts: "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white ... I will overcome the tradition of silence" (59). Anzaldúa thus provides examples of spiritual activism and reveals how our inner psyches and identity formations shape and are shaped by socio-material reality. To effect change in oneself, however, begins with responding to, and being critical of, systemic injustices while imagining a decolonized world.

SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM UTILIZES A CRITICAL METHODOLOGY

This self/global transformational dynamic is vital for critically reimagining the spaces in between self and world and facilitates a shift in our consciousness and perspectives. It allows us to see things from two or more angles, which can alter perception to imagine and balance contemporary society's worldview with the nonordinary worldview (Anzaldúa, *Light* 28). It is where spiritual transformation and rebirth occur. Anzaldúa regularly speaks about owning up to, or taking responsibility for, our individual *deconocimientos* or "shadows" that make us headstrong and encourages us to look deeper into our own subjective, egocentric, and myopic positions that reject alliance-based approaches and attempts at reconciliation and healing. According to her, these shadows are internal wounds that keep us from contemplating our localized and global condition, and the ways in which our individual actions and behaviours contribute to that condition. As she explains,

[w]hen we own our shadow, we allow the breath of healing to enter our lives. Let's look at these events as catalysts that allow us to reframe global disasters, prompt us into remapping our priorities – figuring out exactly what we believe in, what our lives mean, and what our purpose is as individuals, as a nation, and as world citizens. Let's call on our inner resources to help us in times of rising and falling, peace and war, compassion and violence. Let's use internal and external conflict and wounds to enter the soul. (22)

Anzaldúa illustrates the ways in which spiritual activism enables us to reflexively reinterpret personal and collective conflicts thus enacting an active modality by which our ontological structures and senses of identity are constantly shifting based on our individual as well as collective events and reflections. It sees the spiritual realm and political sphere as closely interrelated and uses inner resources and world events to envision new priorities, projects, and value systems and to reconstruct our individual/collective identities by examining the broader systemic and global condition.

Anzaldúa delves deeply into this idea in her final chapter, “Now Let Us Shift” in *Light in the Dark*. Anzaldúa portrays the path to *conocimiento* (knowledge) and its relation to self-global renovation, and confronts an infectious globalization, global capitalism, and social deterioration:

All, including the planet and every species, are caught between cultures and bleed-throughs among different worlds – each with its own version of reality. We are experiencing a personal, global identity crisis in a disintegrating social order that possesses little heart and functions to oppress people by organizing them into hierarchies of commerce and power – a collusion of government, transnational industry, business, and the military, all linked by a pragmatic technology and science voracious for money and control. This system and its hierarchies affect people’s lives in concrete and devastating ways and justify a sliding scale of human worth used to keep human-kind divided. It condones the mind theft, spirit murder, exploitation, and genocide de los otros. We are collectively conditioned not to know that every comfort of our lives is acquired with the blood of conquered, subjugated, enslaved, or exterminated people, an exploitation that continues today. We are completely dependent on consumerism, the culture of the dollar, and the colossal powers that sustain our lifestyles. (119)

Here, Anzaldúa unabashedly criticizes and condemns our late capitalistic structures and their modes of ideological, cultural, and global domination, thus underscoring spiritual activism’s critical approach. She speaks to a globalization that has allowed financial, military, and economic power to dictate individual, national, and global forms of identity, relations, and commerce, funnelling power into the hands of the corrupt few – governments, militaries, international industries and corporations, multi-billionaires, and so on. She speaks to and excoriates the inner colonization of our minds, and the ideologies and identities fortified by media propaganda of rampant consumerism, endless comforts, luxuries, and entertainments and radical neoliberal individualism. She juxtaposes personal and global problems while contemplating the dysfunctional global condition and remaining open to the seriousness of today’s real-world problems. She navigates the space between her identity and our global, collective state in a meditative writing style that highlights her in-between positional strategy. Anzaldúa deduces that we can transform reality by writing new narratives and changing our perspectives and perceptions, something that she herself constantly explores through the writing process itself.

Anzaldúa challenges us to break out of old mental patterns and emotional prisons and deepen our range of perception to allow us to see how our lives and actions are coupled with others and to reflect deeply on the global. She asks us to combine inner reflection and vision – the mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, and subtle bodily awarenesses – with social and political action and lived experience to generate subversive knowledge

and action, (Anzaldúa, *Light* 120) and develop ethical and compassionate stratagems to negotiate conflict and difference and find common ground through the formation of holistic views and alliances (123). To include these dialectics and to act on our visions and beliefs is the very process of enacting spiritual activism as internal shifts lead to external changes. It requires that we stretch beyond narrow culturally imposed limits and become fully functioning human beings and contributing members of our communities, and people worthy and capable of self-respect, dignity, integrity, and love (136).

SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM EXPANDS ON TRADITIONAL ONTOLOGICAL CATEGORIES

Spiritual activism rejects narrow and previously conceived categories of identity such as colour, class, and career and embraces identities in terms of the global and spiritual (Anzaldúa, *Light* 141). In this counter-narrative, traditional boundaries dividing “Us” from “Others” break down, and we are allowed to reimagine novel possibilities (141). These changes reinforce and require both inner and outer resources as the inner/spiritual/personal dynamic causes changes in the social/collective/material realms (141). Thus, we cannot meaningfully change either area without actively working on both fronts.

When projects fail due to disagreement, conflict, or lack of transformative power, spiritual activism calls on the connectionist faculty that permits us to see the common ground between all things and people, reasserting objective peace and harmony, and a radically inclusive politics (Anzaldúa, *Light* 148). As Anzaldúa asserts,

[i]n gatherings where we've forgotten that the object of conflict *is* peace, la napantlera proposes spiritual techniques (mindfulness, openness, receptivity) along with activist tactics. Where before we saw only separateness, differences, and polarities, our connectionist sense of spirit recognizes nurturances and reciprocity and encourages alliances among groups working to transform communities . . . reminding us that spirit connects the irreconcilable warring parts para que todo el mundo se haga un paiz, so that the whole world may become un pueblo. (149)

Anzaldúa is creating a space within herself and her audience's imagination for true “progress” for humanity arising from our ability to establish coalition, community, togetherness, and interconnectivity. The work of spiritual activism is to painstakingly, constantly, and ever-changingly envision and manufacture the spaces and ways in which a coming together is possible and to make a declaration to nurture and embody an identity that critically considers the unjust worldly situation and seeks to subvert it. It is what enables us to be compassionate toward the Other to undo forms of systemic oppression (154). Anzaldúa creates intellectual and written spaces in which we, individually

and collectively, might embody the identities and actions that align with such ideologies and practices.

Keating importantly points out, however, that Anzaldúa's radically inclusive politics deconstruct traditional ontological categories and replaces them with a transformational exchange that sees both self and world change as interdependent enterprises. As she explains,

[t]hough most people self define by what they exclude, we define who we are by what we include. . . . Anzaldúa does not discount the importance of gender, ethnicity/race, sexuality, ability, and other identity-related components. However, she maintains that these conventional categories that are too restrictive and cannot adequately define us. Indeed, she suggests that these identity-based categories have been and still are used to disempower and oppress us. ("I'm a Citizen" 62)

Thus, spiritual activism, as Keating explains it, focuses on inclusivity and rejects the ways in which traditional identity and ontological categories may limit or block new relations and coalitions from forming. It reconceptualizes these ontological structures in terms of inclusivity, freedom, and change that is not dependent on traditional western identity categories. As Keating asserts, "Anzaldúa insists that self-change should be an end in itself; instead this 'recreation of the self' must be part of a wider process requiring both intense self-reflection and back and forth action on individual and communal levels" (59). Anzaldúa's self-recreative process requires openness to intense self-reflection and action.

APPLYING SELF-CHANGE AS A MEANS OF GLOBAL CHANGE IN AND OF ITSELF

Many theorists are now making use of, developing, and applying Anzaldúa's theories and methods to real-world, transnational, ecological, and global problems. Kavitha Koshy suggests that Anzaldúa's work offers a different approach to activism that can be practically and successfully applied to transnational space and marks a critical moment in transnational theorizing. In an attempt to understand transnational experience in a globalized world, she presents troubles in international politics that perpetuate the misunderstandings and stereotypes of the Other projected by western, Eurocentric ideologies for the purposes of maintaining hegemonic systems of power and privilege. She sees Anzaldúa's works as attempting to decolonize notions of the Other and establish interdependent communities and nations through transnational collaboration and international coalition building. Héctor Calderón, similarly, appreciates the transformative power and shift in Anzaldúa's work and writings from *This Bridge Called My Back*, an earlier work, to *this bridge we call home*, a late work. He notes that

Anzaldúa incorporates more Mexican, Indigenous, and Aztec philosophies and spiritualities to highlight commonality in planetary and cosmic terms and our connection to the earth's environment (296). Angelita Borbón notes an understanding that spirituality and identity evolve from one's relationship to the land, foreshadowing further theorizations into the relationship between identity and environment in Anzaldúan thought (187–88). What is more, a variety of theorists are beginning to employ Anzaldúa's ideas of self-global transformation pragmatically to attack present-day tyrannical regimes. These applications of Anzaldúan theory should inspire us in that they focus on environmental and social justice issues and intensify our sense of community and commitment to alliance-based approaches to contemporary injustices.

AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC TAKE: SPIRITUAL ACTIVIST PRACTICES

While there are potentially infinite ways to conceptualize spiritual activist practices, my own personal journey demonstrates the ways in which I see myself as engaging with these ideas, merging theory and lived experiences, and paying homage to the depth of thought and encouragement that I have attained from reading Anzaldúa's profound works. I remember when I was eighteen years old and a new, nervous student of philosophy and the college experience itself. I was taking a course on environmental ethics when we were assigned to watch a few documentaries about concentrated animal feeding operations, factory farming, animal rights, and the link to climate change and environmental degradation. We read the famous utilitarian Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," among some of his other works, and I was challenged to consider utilitarian principles, morality, and the consequences of my actions on a deeper level. Up to this point, I had been a heavy meat eater. Some of my favoured foods consisted of traditional Mexican dishes such as *albondigas*, a thick soup filled with ground beef meatballs, and *menudo*, another savory soup loaded with pork or tripe (cow's stomach). I had not critically considered nor was concerned with the effects of the consumption of meat, my family's everyday dietary behaviours, and our culturally normalized traditions and practices. Yet, after visibly witnessing the treatment of animals and learning about the reality of animal agriculture's egregious harm, and its larger commercial processes, I was forever altered. I learned how animal agriculture, the meat industry, and meat consumption have become the leading causes of environmental degradation, habitat loss, climate change, world hunger, horrendous working conditions, and even cancer, diabetes, and widespread disease, all while emitting more greenhouse gases than the entire transportation industry. I could no longer be a part of such a system, despite my traditions and my cultural background. I have

since then chosen a vegan lifestyle while becoming more aware of the ways in which my identity, culture, and actions were complicit. I have since then attempted to act in ways that cause the least harm to other people, animals, and environments, given the parameters of what I can do as an individual with choices – being a privileged western US citizen in academia who has the luxury of dietary selection and the ability to choose not to eat certain foods or purchase certain items. I frame this change in my identity as one that ascribes to and showcases a spiritual activist positionality that disrupts and reconceptualizes normalized and detrimental western identity formations and practices.

I am concerned with all forms of systemic injustices – racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, rampant consumerism, unsustainable commerce and agriculture, ecological destruction, speciesism, and every other metric used to divide and exploit people, animals, and the environment. I am concerned with global capitalism and a neocolonial globalization that views everything as commodity and expendable forms of capital. I am concerned with the lack of knowledge, lack of alarm, lack of action, and the lack of basic humanity in our western institutions and industries. Listening to the voice inside me tells me that these issues inherently interconnect, intersect, and inter-develop deep within our psyches, which in turn construct the cultures, identities, and spaces we occupy. This article attempts to understand these shortcomings within myself and within my identity as I currently see it. I have searched for theories and ideas that can show how these grievous issues and externalities interrelate in holistic and network-like ways, yet it was not until I encountered the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and her concept of spiritual activism that I have come to position my identity and research in ways that will explore these matters – the interconnective fabric of all materiality and of our shared realities – and the ways to positive social change.

I am a spiritual activist who views one's own identity as inextricably connected with all, one who constantly considers how one's actions relate to, and contribute to, the countless hegemonic formations that pervade our world today, attempting to undo and rethink these modes of being by subjectively acting upon the world's interconnectedness. I believe that my actions have explicit consequences, and I am discovering an ongoing process of decolonization within myself. And while there are many forms and applications that spiritual activism can take, it implores you to find your own creative means of action, while accounting for your own ethnographic background, culturally imposed limits and conditions, and material and historical situatedness. While the extent of today's world problems is dizzying, stupefying, overwhelming – indeed, where does one start? – and while I acknowledge that the ways in which neoliberal power dynamics place responsibility on individuals instead of underlying structural formations, what other choice do we have for manifesting positive change, especially as First World citizens with privilege and the ability for action? Our western culture mirrors these unjust systems; we

are hedonistic consumers, contributors to assemblages that reinforce binaries, modes of destruction, and separatisms. We must start with acknowledging this and begin the hard, painstaking, and courageous work of renegotiating our identities against these prevailing systems. It is my hope that Anzaldúa's spiritual activism spurs you to rethink aspects of your own identity formations and search for ways of being and acting so that, in Anzaldúa's words, "the whole world may become un pueblo" (*Light* 149).

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