

A Critique of Philosophical Shamanism

ABSTRACT:

In this article, I critique two conceptions from the history of academic philosophy regarding academic philosophers as shamans, deriving more community-responsible criteria for any future versions. The first conception, drawing on Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism* (1951), is a transcultural figure abstracted from concrete Siberian practitioners. The second, drawing on Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), balances Eliade's excessive abstraction with Indigenous American philosophy's emphasis on embodied materiality, but also overemphasizes genetic inheritance to the detriment of environmental embeddedness. I therefore conclude that any aspiring philosophical shaman must ground their bodily-material transformative linguistic practices in the practices and environments of their own concrete communities, including the nonverbal languages of bodily comportment, fashion, and dance, in pursuit of social justice for all, including sovereignty, ecological justice, and well-being for Indigenous peoples worldwide.

KEYWORDS: shamanism; Gloria Anzaldúa; Indigeneity; Mircea Eliade

Among anthropologists, there is a fierce controversy over the figure of the shaman, with some reserving the term for practitioners in hunter-gatherer societies in present-day Siberia (among whom the term originated), and others defining shaman more broadly to include any figure performing similar functions, from prehistory until today.¹ Though the exact nature of these functions (and whether there is one, and only one, figure who performs them) is central to this controversy, the majority view is helpfully summarized by Russian anthropologist Anna Kuznetsova. She schematizes the Siberian shaman according to the following four attributes: (1) divine election involving dreams, (2) initiation through sickness and self-healing, (3) musical and dancing performances, and (4) responsibility for meeting the community's psychospiritual needs (Kuznetsova 1). A proponent of the Siberian-only view, Kuznetsova argues that this specific religious figure has been improperly attributed to other cultures and civilizations, including her example of the mythical figure Orpheus in ancient Greece.

The history of such importations is documented by religious studies scholar Kocku van Stuckrad, who writes of a "neoshamanism" or "modern Western shamanism" as a nineteenth-

century reaction to what Max Weber termed the “disenchanting” of contemporary society. “For quite a few European enlighteners,” van Stuckrad begins, “the shaman was a religious virtuoso, a reminder of those ancient ecstasies and artists who were able to transgress ordinary reality by means of music and poetry” (773). Then, after “Mircea Eliade in 1951 put forward his new conception of the shaman as trance specialist,” for thinkers inspired thereby, such as Jung and Joseph Campbell, the shaman “became an indication of a new understanding of humanity’s relation to nature, of man’s ability to access spiritual levels of reality, and of leading a respectful life toward the ‘sacred web of creation’” (773). And finally, after the “seminal work of Carlos Castaneda,” “major shamanic protagonists hold a degree in anthropology” and “try to combine this education with a spiritual practice outside the academy” (774). The relevance of this history to American philosophy can be seen in van Stuckrad’s identification of Thoreau and Emerson as an intermediary link (between Schelling’s nature philosophy and neo-Shamanism) (787).

The present investigation concerns precisely this extension of the shaman concept to academic philosophers, particularly common in American philosophy and pragmatism, where it often takes the form of channeling of Native American traditions. More recently, it has been identified and valorized in the work of the influential Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa. Though increasingly appreciated by non-Indigenous philosophers, Anzaldúa has been criticized by scholars of Latin American Subaltern Studies for claiming to speak for Indigenous peoples without tribal authority, and for advocating the concept of *mestizaje* despite the latter’s continuing prominent role in matrices of oppression for Indigenous peoples in Latin America.ⁱⁱ

More generally, as noted by contemporary neo-Shamanism advocate and anthropologist Robert J. Wallis, this tendency within “neo-Shamanisms” has been criticized as a form of “neo-colonialism” (xiii). This is especially true, Wallis notes, in the U.S., “where many Native

Americans are extremely angry at what they see as ‘stealing’ of their traditions by ‘New Agers’, be it sweat mythologies, sweat lodges, or monuments” (xiii). On this point, Wallis references P. J. Deloria, son of the influential Native American thinker Vine Deloria, Jr., on the harm done by early U.S. enthusiasts of shamanism. “In true colonial fashion,” Wallis relates, “inventing American identity required distancing real Indians, perceiving them to be already extinct or at least vanishing, to uphold an imperialist and romanticised idea of Indians past. The very real Native American struggle for social justice was ignored (25). More generally, Wallis summarizes four central objections to neo-shamanism: “1. Decontextualizing and universalizing 2. Psychologizing and individualising 3. Reproduction and reification of cultural primitivism. 4. Romanticizing of indigenous shamans” (49).

Amplifying Wallis’ and Deloria’s critique is that of Geary Hobson, an American Studies scholar of Cherokee, Quapaw and Chickasaw descent. Hobson’s original essay, “The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism,” concerned white spoken-word poets in the Bay Area who were dressing in pseudo-Indigenous garb, adopting pseudo-Indian names, and performing homages to white poet Gary Snyder’s poem “Shaman Songs” (Hobson 1). Reflecting on this piece twenty-five years later (in 2002), Hobson turns to purveyors of “White-thought ‘Indian medicine’,” for whose efforts he blames “spiritual fakers” including Carlos Castaneda (3). By contrast, Hobson affirms that Native American “medicine people” (his preferred term, as opposed to “shamans”) have continued to practice, largely invisibly to non-Indigenous people, and in a way that is dispersed across various professions and social roles, including “throughout the university structure” (4-7).

While fully supporting Hobson’s analysis, I would add two caveats regarding the limitations of its applicability to the present investigation. First, as noted above with the example

of Anzaldúa, not all proponents of philosophical shamanism today are white, and some are even Indigenous (so either the problem is bigger than just “White Shamanism,” or philosophical shamanism does not coincide exactly with Hobson’s object of critique). In part for this reason, Native American theorist Ward Churchill’s similar critique prefers the term “spiritual hucksterism,” and names multiple Indigenous practitioners thereof.ⁱⁱⁱ Second, my previous work on Cherokee philosophy dovetails with Hobson’s preference for the term “medicine” for Native American healing practices—reserving “shamanism” for the Indigenous Siberian communities who claim their word for themselves alone—so I do not claim any place for the present investigation within any Native American spiritual tradition.^{iv}

It is nevertheless imperative, especially for those raised and working in a U.S. context and tradition, whatever their embodiment and position, to attend to Hobson here, being vigilant to not fall prey to similar malfeasance. The present investigation, in part, is an attempt to respond to these problems, by suggesting more contextualizing, community-centered, respectful, and responsible criteria for any future conception of philosophical shamanism. More precisely, any such conception, compared to its two predecessors, must emphasize the responsibility of the shaman to their concrete community, specifically an ability and willingness to respond to their community members.

This responsiveness, in turn, implies a firm grounding in the existing practices and environments of the community, since to be able to respond one must speak the language of one’s interlocutors, both comprehending and creating communication. Crucial in this context, and widely neglected in the history of philosophy, is nonverbal language, including body language, comportment, fashion, and dance.^v At this level, the shaman must be able to interpret the bodies and movements of the community, to move in the ways to which they have become

accustomed, and also be able to improvise and innovate new ways of moving to empower the kind of transformation necessary for repairing the community's existential injuries. The shaman must, in short, both dance the current dances of their community, and also teach them how to dance in newer, healthier, more flourishing ways.^{vi}

Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of this critique of philosophical shamanism is that its emphasis on community responsibility provides an opportunity to direct attention and energy to the ongoing struggle for social justice for Indigenous peoples worldwide, including for Native American tribes. Foremost in this program, according to Kehoe, is "sovereignty, the right of nations to govern themselves"; while for Churchill, the most pressing issue is ecological justice (Kehoe 88, Churchill 30-31). To this I would add violence against Native American women. "More than 80% of Native women," according to the National Institute of Justice, "will experience physical, sexual, or psychological violence in their lifetimes."^{vii} Clearly, these three problems are connected, since a people suffering colonialism, in an ecosystem under constant attack, are also rendered more vulnerable to various other forms of violence.

I. A First Conception of Philosophical Shamanism

The difficulties with the appropriation of the concept of shamanism in the non-Indigenous world, as summarized by contemporary Russian ethnologist Anna Kuznetsova, begin with Eliade's foundational work itself, *Shamanism*, originally published in 1951. Despite its influence and popularity, Eliade's study is also known for its many problematic dimensions. For a few examples, Alice Kehoe criticizes his work for its lack of direct field research and trafficking in "cultural primitivism," Barbara Tedlock decries his marginalizing and erasing of women shamans, and Robert Wallis identifies an unconscious Christian bias in Eliade,

demonizing the underworld dimensions of shamanic practice while romanticizing its celestial dimensions (Kehoe 42; Tedlock 64; Wallis 35-36).

Most importantly for my purposes here, Kuznetsova argues *Shamanism* stretches the concept too far from its original meaning, based in the sociocultural context of ancient Siberian tribes. Eliade, Kuznetsova claims, “virtually ignores the crucial moment, to wit the social role the shaman plays in traditional society” (1). For this reason, she explains, among experts on Siberian shamanism Eliade’s work is “notorious for its theoretical generalizations, but not exactness of ethnographic data interpreted” (1). The pump was already primed, therefore, for later Western theorists inspired by Eliade to further overgeneralize, rendering his already-tenuous connections to flesh-and-blood Siberian shamans more tenuous still.

On my own reading of Eliade, though I do find discussions of specific tribal practices, the latter are admittedly undermined by the abstract, comparative model that he outlines in the book’s early chapters. In Eliade’s defense, though, he does acknowledge, even in these early chapters, that “‘self-made’ shamans are considered less powerful than those who inherited the profession or who obeyed the ‘call’ of the gods and spirits,” and that “a shaman is not recognized as such until after he has received two kinds of teaching,” which teachings include “traditional shamanic techniques, names and functions of the spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan, secret language, etc.” (13). In such passages, Eliade clearly recognizes that participation in a specific sociohistorical community is necessary for shamanism, more specifically as a historical source for the shaman’s pedagogy for, and recognition from, the tribe.

All this richness is easily forgotten, however, in the light of Eliade’s famous four-word definition of “shamanism” in Chapter 1 as consisting of “archaic techniques of ecstasy” (4). Ecstasy, in Eliade’s sense, means the euphoric experience wherein the boundaries of the ego

breakdown and one feels oneself transcendently connected to the rest of the cosmos, which is helpfully broken down into its neurobiological and social-conflictual components by Lewis Williams.^{viii} An important component in such experiences, of course, is the use of psychotropic substances, as emphasized by writings of Castaneda, in the record of his alleged firsthand experiences with the Indigenous spiritual leader Don Juan (though Wallis observes that scholars have since “debunked” Castaneda’s work).^{ix} One could argue, however, that what is important in shamanism is not merely the ecstasy, nor the “who” and “what” of the shaman’s self (including the body associated with that self), but also the nature of the tribe (including in its past, present and future), along with the tribe’s surrounding cultural and geographic environment (including neighboring tribes, and the climatic and ecological regions features of its home). Put in terms of Eliade’s definition, techniques vary by technicians, communities, the histories in which they are caught up, and the environments on which they draw and in which they work.

One of the first theorists to follow Eliade’s generalizing lead, by identifying the shaman with non-Indigenous thinkers is Michael E. Holstein. Holstein not only follows Eliade in privileging the shaman’s ecstatic experiences over tribal religious practices, but goes further by claiming that the historical shaman’s imagination has “created” a “supernatural world,” “or rather, has given it its most current shape” (317). The problem here, from the perspectives of actual shamans and their tribes, is that the supernatural world (whether literal or figurative) preexists the shaman, and shapes the shaman’s imagination at least as much as the shaman’s imagination shapes the tribal world.^x In other words, Holstein here assumes a scientific materialist worldview, and deploys it in an ahistorical way, by trying to identify an atomized entity in a society for which the relationship among humans and environments was much more complexly embedded. It is entirely possible, moreover, that this worldview is inaccurate, and that

the powers to which the shaman appeals do indeed have reality independent of one person's imagination, though not necessarily the reality of a supernatural entity as normally conceived. This is not say that one must simply adopt, as an alternative to the scientific materialist view, a tribal or purely subjective one, but rather that one should be open, in the spirit of William James, to alternate religious experiences and ways of being.

Similarly problematic is Holstein's description of the shaman's productions as "his fictions" (318). Bracketing the prior issue (as to whether there is any literal basis to the shaman's supernatural claims), it is not obvious that the content of such claims "belongs" to the shaman (in either the sense of "owned by" or of "originating with") as an individual. Put simply, the shaman does not individually own the content of the shamanic work on behalf of the tribe. That work is, on the contrary, part of a long tradition that preexists the shaman and helps shape the shaman as both practitioner and tribe member. In Eliade's words, "there is no question of anarchic hallucinations" with the shaman, nor "of a purely individual plot and dramatis personae; the hallucinations and *mise en scène* follow traditional models that are perfectly consistent and possess an amazingly rich theoretical content" (14). This is not to say that the shaman does not have creative agency (which agency Eliade affirms throughout his study), but rather that the shamanic creator is not an isolated, atomistic artistic in a late capitalist society, making and branding artificial creations.

Even more problematic, in this ethnocentric vein, is Holstein's concluding sentence, which attempts to buttress his shaman/non-Indigenous writer analogy by affirming "our" "continuing acts of healing ourselves and civilizing darkness" (320). This problematic sentence raises several immediate questions. Who is the "our" in that sentence, and what "their" does it imply? What is this "darkness" and what is the implicitly contrasted light? Finally, what does it

mean to “civilize” that darkness? Every part of this quote illustrates the cultural appropriation that has tarnished non-Indigenous appeals to shamanism from the beginning.

An even more important point in Holstein’s analysis for the present investigation is his attempt to support his shaman/non-Indigenous writer analogy with historical evidence. Based on certain Romantic and Modern poets’ keen interest in oral ancient oral poetry, Holstein draws another loose analogy: Greco-Roman possession (including in Orpheus) and shamanic alliances with female spirits (319). Against this view, Kuznetsova goes into careful empirical detail to contrast the Siberian shamans with the Greek figure of Orpheus. Additionally, Eliade’s detailed account of shamanic feminine spirit alliances further illuminates the dis-analogy involved in Holstein’s analysis (75). Even assuming both analogies to be sound, however, there is another core difficulty with both, which derives from the very logical nature of analogy. Similarity does not equal identity, nor does attempting to emulate a tradition entail belonging to that tradition. For example, the fact that Samuel Taylor Coleridge admired ancient shamans does not make him a shaman himself. At most, it makes him comparable to a shaman, in certain ways, whereas Holstein’s title asserts, much more strongly, “The Philosopher as Shaman.” This structural difficulty, though admittedly more pronounced in Holstein than in the other defenders of this first conception of non-Indigenous philosophers as shamans, is also present to some degree in all.

For starters, James M. Glass’ “The Philosopher and the Shaman: The Political Vision as Incantation” makes an argument from analogy similar to Holstein. Although I cannot identify a clear thesis, the gist of the essay is that philosophers and shamans share several important traits. To his credit, Glass notes in his first paragraph that he is “not arguing that the philosopher and the shaman are functional equivalents” (181). More specifically, Glass claims that shaman and philosopher possess two similar characteristics: “their manipulation of images, the similarity in

the way they each perceives his task as a healer” (181). Unfortunately, this historical nuance at the beginning of Glass’ article is gradually eclipsed. Claiming that “the shaman performs a psychological cure,” Glass describes this cure as one of “working on perception,” its purpose being “to devise an incantation that will reach the unconscious” (186). Though I grant that the psychological dimension of the shaman’s work is important (including from the shaman’s perspective), that work also involves several other crucial dimensions, notably including a bodily dimension. For Glass, however, the body is only indirectly present in shamanism, specifically by way of the shaman’s unconscious, which Glass specifies as Carl Jung’s conception thereof. The latter includes Jung’s famous unconscious “archetypes,” among which Glass emphasizes the “archetype of rebirth” (187).

By the end of Glass’ article, explicit ethnocentrism appears. Attempting to acknowledge specific differences between the shaman and philosopher, Glass claims that “the shaman’s healing process employs idiosyncratic methods, bizarre gestures, and chants” (190). In addition to its problematic tone, this claim overlooks that (a) shamanic processes are not necessarily considered idiosyncratic or bizarre in their tribal contexts, and (b) its description would be more accurate for non-Indigenous philosophers in their own cultural contexts than for historical shamans in theirs. It is non-Indigenous philosophers whose processes are perceived as idiosyncratic, whose methods are interpreted as bizarre by most laypeople in non-Indigenous societies, and who engage in seemingly endless series of meaningless chants. Perhaps Glass is unconsciously projecting present-day non-Indigenous philosophers’ traits onto the figure of the shaman, thus inadvertently mischaracterizing both. Interestingly, this is also the only place the body appears in Glass’ analysis, namely in his claim that the philosopher per se is uninterested in the body (192). As I will relate in my next section, the exact opposite view of the body’s

importance is arguably the defining feature of the second conception of non-Indigenous philosophers as shamans.

II. A Second Conception of Philosophical Shamanism

I now move forward in historical time, to the second conception of philosophical shamanism, most advocates of which rely on Gloria Anzaldúa.^{xi} In her texts, one finds an admirably frank acknowledgment of ethnocentrism and cultural appropriation of Indigenous and tribal cultural productions. Anzaldúa herself makes almost no references to herself as shaman in her published works, except for a three-page essay collected in the *Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman.”^{xii} I will consider that text below, in the context of Keating’s reading thereof, after relating a few brief references to shamanism in her interviews.^{xiii}

“I felt a calling,” she says in one interview, “to be an artist in the sense of a shaman, healing through words, using words as a medium for expressing the flights of the soul, communing with the spirit, having access to other realities or worlds” (19). If this sounds supernatural, she also expresses a more reductively conventional version of the idea later, claiming that “artists practice a kind of shamanism through the imagination” (251). For example, she engages in what she terms a “shapeshifting” of identities—“intellectual, racial, sexual”—modeled on “a type of Mexican indigenous shamanism where a person becomes an animal, becomes a different person (132). A similar tension can be found in her dismissiveness of what she calls “pseudospirituality or New Age awareness,” immediately followed by the concession that, for some people, such practices constitute “a legitimate first step toward really becoming” shamans (160). The closest thing I can find to Anzaldúa naming herself as a shaman

appears in her claim that “the world of the shaman, which is a parallel universe to this one we’re living in” has “bled into” her own life (225).

Given this limited discussion of shamanism in Anzaldúa, along with her importance for the second conception, I will now supplement my analysis with one place in her work that intersects closely with the work of shamans and the concept of shamanism, namely her account of soul and its healing. In brief, Anzaldúa conceives of soul as a construction from the materials of embodied materiality, the scene of which construction is a sociopolitical environment filled with destructive forces of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.

The central concept in Anzaldúa in connection to soul, *hacienda caras* (literally, “making faces”) contributes part of the title of her second edited anthology of feminists of color, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras* (her first being *This Bridge Called My Back*). Anzaldúa first unpacks this concept in her editor’s introduction, entitled “*Haciendo caras, una entrada*” [“Making faces, an introduction”] (xv-xxvii). As implied by the slash between the English and Spanish in the anthology’s title, Anzaldúa torsions the concept of soul away from the orthodox Christian/Cartesian immortal entity composed of spiritual substance. In Anzaldúa’s case, the direction of this torsion is toward both (a) materialism and embodiment (through the “faces” half of the phrase *hacienda caras*), and (b) sociopolitical constructivism (through the “making” half of the phrase “making soul”). Anzaldúa begins the anthology’s introduction as follows, with an initial unpacking of this titular phrase:

Among Chicanas/mexicanas, *hacienda caras*, “making faces,” means to put on a face, express feelings by distorting the face—frowning, grimacing, looking sad, glum, or disapproving. For me, *hacienda caras* has the added connotation of making *gestos*

subversivos, political subversive gestures, the piercing look that questions or challenges, the look that says, “Don’t walk all over me,” the one that says, “Get out of my face” (xv).

Note the two distinct layers Anzaldúa is deploying here, namely a widely accepted meaning in the Chicana community, along with Anzaldúa’s individual improvisation on that first meaning, which thus adds politicized defiance. In short, she weaponizes her people’s language, to empower them to greater freedom and racial justice.

Justifying this linguistic weaponizing, Anzaldúa explains that her fellow mestizas “are ‘written’ all over, or should I say, carved and tattooed with the sharp needles of experience.” In this process, she continues, their faces are “the most naked, most vulnerable, exposed and significant topography of the body.” Disempowered persons, specifically Chicana lesbians, Anzaldúa explains, have faces which do not match white patriarchy’s ideals, and thus “have had to ‘change’ faces,” to put on masks that “drive a wedge between our intersubjective personhood and the *personas* that we present to the world” (xv). The use of masks is also widespread in shamanic practices, often involving the invoking and channeling of oppressive forces by impersonating them via the mask. Digging even deeper into this metaphor, Anzaldúa then introduces a technical term from sewing, “interfacing,” which refers to sewing “two pieces of fabric to provide and support and stability to collar, cuff, yoke.” It is this metaphorical interfacing between disempowered folks’ masks, she writes, which “provides the space from which we can thrust out and crack the masks” (xv).

That is, if Chicana women were wearing only one mask, it might be possible for the oppressors to make it large and seamless enough that their true skin would never show. But since the oppressors find it necessary to apply multiple masks (including masks for proper gender identity and expression, for proper sexual expression, and for racial expression), the places where

those masks overlap inadvertently creates slippage, which can be utilized for defiant resistance. Anzaldúa summarizes and interprets this metaphor as follows: “‘Making faces’ is my metaphor for constructing one’s identity. *Usted es el modeador de su carne tanto como el de su alma*. You are the shaper of your flesh as well as your soul” (xvi). Armed with metaphorical fabric, patterns, needles, scissors, and imagination, the possibilities for Anzaldúa’s new souls seem as endless as those of the beneficiaries of the shaman.

Appropriately, then, the figure is invoked explicitly in this introduction to *Making Faces*, *Making Soul*, when Anzaldúa reveals that her political improvisation on *hacienda caras* is, in fact, neither entirely new, nor purely individual. Instead, this meaning possesses cultural roots much deeper even than those of her contemporary Chicana culture. Among Chicana ancestors are the Aztec (or Mexica) people, and according to Mexica sorcerers/shamans, Anzaldúa claims, “one was put on earth to create one’s ‘face’ (body) and ‘heart’ (soul)” (xvi). Moreover, in these shamans’ conception, “the soul was a speaker of words and the body a doer of deeds” (xvi).

Having considered this first appearance of “making soul” in Anzaldúa’s work, I now turn to its further elaboration in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which also clarifies the shamanic dimensions of this account. In *Borderlands*’ first reference to “soul,” Anzaldúa claims that, in Aztec/Mexican mythology, “the serpent symbolizes the soul (as the earth, the mother),” which also constitutes one half of “the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/earth/feminine” (7). Thus, for Anzaldúa, soul is caught up with duality, and with vaguely spiritual forces, just as the shaman, according to Eliade and others, is often an androgynous figure, situated at the blurred intersecting lines of traditional gender identities and performances. This connection to duality and the supernatural is also true of the second reference to “soul” in *Borderlands*, in a section called “*Enfrentamientos con el alma* [clashes with the

soul]” (64). There, Anzaldúa relates how, after her father’s passing, her mother “put blankets over the mirrors” “Perhaps a part of her knew,” Anzaldúa speculates, “that a mirror is a door through which the soul may ‘pass’ to the other side and she didn’t want us to follow our father to the place where the souls of the dead live” (68). Anzaldúa then relates how ancient “Mexican Indians made mirrors of volcanic glass known as obsidian,” into which Nahuatl shamans would stare, and fall into a trance in order to receive “a vision concerning the future of the tribe and the will of the gods” (68).

Borderlands’ third reference to “soul,” which reintroduces “making soul,” concerns what Anzaldúa calls the “*Coatlicue* state.” The latter, she explains, is a kind of psychic hibernation, named after Coatlicue, the Aztec serpent goddess, “Earth Mother,” and “goddess of birth and death.” The Coatlicue state, partially synonymous for Anzaldúa to “addiction,” is a kind of possession by this snake goddess, who creates one as she destroys one, and who helps one to do the same for oneself. That is, since the body is a finite space and set of resource, mythological and religious forces cannot recreate soul without first destroying at least some existing elements, since those are currently monopolizing that bodily space and set of resources. “The soul uses everything,” Anzaldúa writes of the Coatlicue state, “to further its own making.” In short, the soul’s “work,” she claims, is to “make soul, increase consciousness of itself” (68).

As to the exact nature of this soul-making work, one clue might be found in Anzaldúa’s claim here that Coatlicue is a goddess not only of the snake, but also of the fusion of snake and eagle, condensed elsewhere in *Borderlands* as the “feathered serpent.” Coatlicue, Anzaldúa elaborates, “represents duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective—something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality” (68). It is in the latter phrase of this quote that I find Anzaldúa’s greatest conceptual innovation regarding soul. To wit, if one rests with the goal

of unifying opposites, one will never be able to erase the fault lines of the divisive past, like a figurine hastily glued back together, a zigzag monument to its history of destruction. The solution Anzaldúa develops, counterintuitively, involves even more destruction, but this time self-destruction, followed by creation. Not mere repair, but recreation. In this way, her innovation resonates with the frequent description of the shamanic path as a descent into individual destruction followed by an ascent into community flourishing.

The first move in this self-overcoming involves an experience that Anzaldúa describes as “*susto*, the soul frightened out of the body,” after which *susto* one’s soul must “descend into *mictlán*, the underworld” (70). Next, once the mestiza soul has arrived in the underworld, “[e]very increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing,” and “[e]very time she makes ‘sense’ of something, she has to ‘cross over,’ kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it” (71). Put in the mythical terms (which Anzaldúa often favors), making soul requires not only the creative, but also the destructive power of Coatlicue. Instead of either maintaining duality, or seamlessly uniting a duality’s two halves, one must actively destroy certain parts of one’s own soul to recreate oneself. In short, one must initiate and embrace self-caused pain, as a sacrifice on one’s own altar of soul-creation.

More precisely, we in the Americas, Anzaldúa insists, must “stop importing Greek myths and the Western Cartesian split point of view and root ourselves in the mythological soil and soul of this continent” (90). We must, that is, destroy some of our faith in the Greeks (and their worshippers, such as Descartes, with his pernicious mind-body dualism), grasp the knife shaped like a pen (or keyboard), write until it hurts, and then write some more. “I look at my fingers,” Anzaldúa writes, “see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink

drips across the page”—the black ink of fiction, and the red ink of its blood sacrifice (93). “Daily I take my throat in my hands,” she concludes, “and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the constant struggle” (94).

Finally from *Borderlands*’ account of making soul, Anzaldúa summarizes it as follows: “When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act” (95). She then paraphrases this as a third-person account of the Chicana subject. “She learns to transform the small ‘I’ into the total Self. *Se hace modeadora de su alma. Segun la concepcion que tiene de si misma, asi sera*” (105). In my own translation of the last two sentences, they read as follows: “She makes herself the shaper of her soul. Following the conception that she has of herself, so will she become.” Here one could almost speak of a feminist democratization of shamanism, which might be a fair characterization of the most important interpreter of Anzaldúa as shaman.

AnaLouise Keating, Anzaldúa’s friend, coeditor and literary trustee, has argued since her death that the shaman is a figure of central importance to Anzaldúa’s work. More precisely, Keating interprets Anzaldúa as offering what Keating terms “poet-shaman aesthetics” (52). Keating defines describes its assumptions as follows:

in poet-shaman aesthetics, words have causal force; words embody the world; words are matter; words become matter. As in shamanic worldviews and indigenous theories and practices—in which words, images, and things are intimately interwoven and the intentional, ritualized performance of specific, carefully selected words shifts reality—poet-shaman aesthetics enables us to enact and concretize transformation (52).

Note here that Keating, unlike advocates of the first conception of philosophical shamanism (such as Holstein and Glass), does not restrict either the shaman or the non-Indigenous writer or

philosopher to mere psychological states or artistic illusions. Instead, she insists that shamanic practice works directly on the raw materials of both the human body and our shared world. Not only is this a more accurate understanding of traditional shamans in their tribal contexts, but it appropriately excludes most non-Indigenous philosophers from the class of shamans (insofar as most non-Indigenous philosophers do not understand their words as directly modifying readers' bodies and material environments). Put positively, Keating's conception of philosophical shamanism implies several criteria that a non-Indigenous philosopher would have to meet to merit the label "shaman."

The above quote from Keating also illuminates a second important feature of this second conception of philosophical shamanism, namely that its advocates tend to be closer to Siberian shamans in their respective embodiments and/or social positions (unlike the exclusively white male advocates of the first conception, and like their critic Kuznetsova). For starters, both Keating herself and her authorial source for this conception (Anzaldúa) identify as women of color. Additionally, most other theorists who have published on Anzaldúa thus far are also Latinx. Finally, Anzaldúa at least claims a direct lineage to traditional Indigenous healers, as a descendant of the Mexica, and more specifically the granddaughter of a traditional Chicana healer called a *bruja* (Spanish for "witch").

Unfortunately, these background conditions begin, as Keating further elaborates her concept of poet-shaman aesthetics, to seem inadequate in countering the ethnocentrism and cultural appropriation she is attempted to resist. For one thing, Keating admits that she "borrowed" the phrase "poet-shaman aesthetics" from Anzaldúa's brief discussion of shamanism in the abovementioned "Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman." In other words, Keating created a concept by appropriating related content from another theorist with closer ties to

Indigenous and tribal societies (and did so only after that theorist's death). Keating then quotes a passage from that essay, in which Anzaldúa describes herself as follows:

trying to practice...in a new way... the oldest "calling" in the world—shamanism... The Sanskrit word for shaman, *saman*, means song. In non-literate societies, the shaman and the poet were the same person. The role of the shaman is, as it was then, to preserve and create cultural or group identity by mediating between the cultural heritage of the past and the present everyday situations people find themselves in. In retrospect I see that this was an unconscious intention on my part in writing *Borderlands/La Frontera*. To carry the poet-shaman analogy further, through my poet's eye I see "illness," *lo que daña*, whatever is harmful in the cultural or individual body (1990,121-22, Anzaldúa's emphasis, quoted in Keating 52).

In addition to the fact that, according to Eliade, the Sanskrit word *saman* instead derives from the Tungusic family of languages of eastern Siberia and northeast China, the main problem in the above passage is a logical one (4).

That is, Anzaldúa begins by equating the poet and the shaman per se (as implied by her claim that she was trying to practice shamanism in the present). But she immediately qualifies that equation, by claiming that the poet and the shaman were in fact only identical in prehistory. Thirdly, she reasserts her initial equation, by affirming the existence of shamans in the present (without clarifying whether they belong only to today's remaining non-literate societies, or to literate societies as well). Finally, she weakens this reasserted original equation by reducing it to a mere analogy between the poet and the shaman (and again she does so without clarifying which terms are being analogized, whether past-shaman/present-poet, or instead shamans/poets per se). Put as a question, can there be for Anzaldúa a present-day shaman-poet in a literate society, or

can a poet today only be analogous to a shaman? Note that this question also haunts the first conception of philosophical shamanism (as manifested in Holstein and Glass).

Keating, for her part, implicitly answers these questions by inferring that Anzaldúa is identifying the poet and shaman. It is unclear to me, however, whether Anzaldúa's text supports Keating's implicit interpretation. Moreover, a significant problem is raised by either alternative. On the one hand, it is trivially true to claim (as Anzaldúa does on the analogy interpretation) that two entities in the present which evolved from one entity in the past share similarities now. On the other hand, it is false to claim (as Anzaldúa does on the identity interpretation, and as Keating does explicitly) that two things which evolved from one entity in the past are for that reason alone necessarily identical in the present.

To her credit, Keating at least acknowledges this problem. She then proceeds, nevertheless, to attempt to justify her own affirmation of the word "shamanism," specifically on the following grounds: (a) Keating in this writing is channeling Indigenous insights, which insights (b) include a helpful philosophy of language, and (c) Anzaldúa was doing the same thing, albeit problematically (55, 56, 57). It is unclear to me, however, why channeling those insights or appreciating those philosophies of language would require the use of the word "shamanism," since that word belongs to a Siberian tribal context to which not even Anzaldúa herself (or even her *bruja* grandmother) possesses any close historical or cultural connection.

Even further disconnected than Anzaldúa and Keating from shamanism's Siberian tribal context are the other advocates of the second conception of philosophical shamanism who follow in Keating's wake. For example, in "Shamanic Urgency and Two-Way Movement as Writing Style in the Works of Gloria Anzaldúa," Betsy Dahms goes even further than Keating, citing Eliade in an explicit identification of Anzaldúa as a shaman. In this way, Dahms exacerbates the

same problem of cultural appropriation that Keating has named in borrowing from Anzaldúa's borrowing from Siberian and Mexica cultural productions.

For one thing, Dahms admits that she deliberately "limits [her] analysis to three main tenets of shamanism," as analyzed by Eliade, namely "the shamanic initiation/vocation, the shamanic quest, and shamanic healing" (10). In other words, Dahms excludes all but a few fragments from Eliade's already reductively abstracting account. In a second example of Dahms' exacerbating this problem in Eliade, though she claims that "the shaman as theorist draws on personal experience in a two-way movement within her person and outward into her community," Dahms gives no indication as to which specific community, if any, she is referring (11). Worse, to this undefined literal community, Dahms then adds an undefined figurative community, referencing "a larger spiritual community of shamans" (11). In short, the environment of the shaman could not be less important than in Dahms' account.

Put in terms of her essay's title, Dahms' analysis prioritizes the "without" half of this "Two-Way [Shamanic] Movement," to the detriment of its other, "within" half. In other words, Dahms follows Eliade too closely, universalizing the shaman into a not culturally specific figure that she then tries to stretch far enough to reach all human communities. And in this process, the shaman's connection to the grounding source is thereby lost, namely the specific tribe's environmentally embedded practices. In Dahms' defense, however, she not only recognizes the problem, but also (like Keating and Anzaldúa before her with this second conception) freely acknowledges and attempts to ameliorate it.

More specifically, following what Dahms describes as "Anzaldúa's careful non-appropriation of Southwestern or Texan indigenous practices," Dahms' solution is to approach "shamanism from a global perspective" (10). It is precisely the globalism, however, of both the

first and second conceptions of philosophical shamanism that arguably leave both Eliade and Anzaldúa most vulnerable to the charge of cultural appropriation. It is for this reason that any future conception should emphasize the concrete, embedded, and embodied dimensions of shamanism, urging any aspirants thereto to ground their work in the practices and environment of their own communities (rather than fetishizing those of exoticized Others).

III. Criteria for any Future Conception of Philosophical Shamanism

To recap, the first two conceptions of philosophical shamanism have deviated too far from traditional shamanic practice, by overemphasizing the decontextualized power of shamans and neglecting their tribal contexts. The most important part of these contexts, as evidenced in part by the later chapters of Eliade's *Shamanism*, and Kuznetsova's article, is that shamans are responsible for what one might call the existential well-being of their tribes (in a role that Eliade characterizes as "psychopomp," a guide of the soul to the realm of the dead). That is, the shaman is supposed to repair existential damage to the tribe and its members by helping them identify and rectify injuries to their soul/being, which for the Siberians typically involved guiding the member through an exploration of the world of the dead. More precisely, this world of the dead includes both the past and the future, the underworld of the deceased and what the world above ground might be after the member's eventual death. In short, the shaman helps tribal members reorient themselves by situating their being in an extended historical framework.

Perhaps the most obvious implication of this new requirement for philosophical shamans is that they must first situate themselves within a local community to whom to be responsible. Though I will not attempt to define this sense of "community" exhaustively, it might be helpful to at least set some conceptual boundaries here. More specifically, I will affirm one new

necessary condition and reject a second condition that has traditionally been considered necessary. First, it is not enough for people to merely have shared thoughts, feelings, interests, etc. (such political or religious ideals, or shared ethnic or gender identity). Nor is it enough to regard oneself as kindred spirits with people who died before one's birth, or with generations allegedly yet to come. Instead, the members of a community must have at some point shared a time and space together, inhabiting simultaneously a four-dimensional territory that forms part of the basis of their connection. Second, members of a community need not possess any preexisting familial, genetic (or otherwise hereditary) connections prior to the creation of the community. This is not to deny the possibility, however, that a community could include familial dimensions, including the genetics-independent connections of "queer families" or "chosen families," nor that genetically-influenced families might result from successive generations of members born to other members.

Returning to the shamans' responsibility to their communities, it includes a responsiveness to each of the members who might need assistance, specifically being able to communicate effectively in terms of both linguistic comprehension and production. Moreover, given that language per se includes nonverbal language, such as body language, comportment, fashion, and dance, and given that accounts of shamanic practice emphasize shamans' use of these languages, practitioners would therefore be more deserving of the title "shaman" if they were fluent in these languages. In other words, philosophical shamans should be concerned, in addition to their verbal language proficiencies, should also be mindful of the symbolic communications of their appearance and embodiment, and develop some kind of choreography for the movements, especially those involving encounters with existentially-ailing fellow community members.

More precisely, philosophical shamans should be able to comprehend and produce nonverbal linguistic communication that is both meaningful and effective for the members of their communities. The meaningfulness of such nonverbal language relies on shamans' adhering sufficiently to existing norms and structures of the community's linguistic practices, and the effectiveness of such nonverbal language relies on shamans' adequately creative innovation and improvisation. Put differently, shaman must look, dress, hold themselves, and move in ways that their fellow community members both (a) recognize and understand the shamans' status and capacity to connect sufficiently with the rest of the community, and also (b) perceive what is original and creative enough in the shaman' productions to effect a transformation in the community members that is sufficient to repair their existential injuries.

This will perhaps be clearer by considering a contrast case to what I am suggesting. Non-Indigenous shamans, or those labeled as such, are usually imagined as solitary adventurers, working in isolation and with radical creativity to assist any ailing person whatever, regardless of their community of origin or relationship to the shamans. Moreover, these alleged shamans are normally presented as engaging in their work for its own sake, or motivated by an abstract benevolence toward all struggling souls, or even without any apparent reason for intervening whatsoever—but almost never because of a sense of obligation on the part of the shamans toward the specific individual in need. This is part of what makes these alleged shamans seem fearsome and mysterious, since the outside observer is at a loss to explain why someone with so much power would be willing to help someone else for no reason, and without being tempted to extract something in return.

In the case I am suggesting, by contrast, shamans more deserving of the name would never act without an explicit relationship of mutual understanding already in place. The

community member would know the shaman, know the shaman's role in the community, and have reason to trust that the shaman will provide genuine and competent assistance—namely, because if not, the shaman stands to suffer negative consequences in the community (for malfeasance, incompetence, etc.). As this picture begins to suggest, this rules out a certain degree of selfishness on the part of the shaman, and it is perhaps for this reason that such a view has not already been widely adopted among non-Indigenous enthusiasts of the concept. Members of capitalist societies tend to be too individualistic and selfish to be willing to accept this much responsibility and community accountability along with considerable existential power. Preferring to be free agents, or freelancers, they do an injustice to the traditions whose name they invoke, provoking distrust and incomprehension from the communities they should be serving, instead operating outside any consistent measures of quality control, or even minimal accountability.

Happily, therefore, the solution to these problems seems straightforward. Those interested in shamanism, if not willing to abandon the label entirely, nor to devote years of study to replicating the exact details of Siberian shamanic practices, should at least model their practices on the historical precedents in one crucial respect. They should make sure they are being responsibly responsible to their communities, communicating—including nonverbally—in ways that are both comprehensible to and transformative for to their fellow community members in need, and thereby to and for the community. Given the many crises affecting communities the world over today, especially among Indigenous communities still fighting for their sovereignty and minimally decent social welfare, there is no time to waste.

Notes

ⁱ For an overview, see Vitebsky. “Shamans,” he begins, “are at once doctors, priests, social workers and mystics,” before concluding that the “shaman seems to be all things to all people” (10). For two examples of the former view, see Kuznetsova. For a corroborating view, see Kehoe. And For three examples of the latter view, see Tedlock, Lewis-Williams, and Wallis. For a recent survey of the anthropological literature, see Adlam and Holyoak.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Saldaña-Portillo, Velazco y Trianosky, and Chanady.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a similar critique, referenced by Hobson, see Churchill.

^{iv} See Joshua Hall (2018).

^v This embodied-communal grounding also resonates with anthropologist Edward T. Hall’s pioneering work on the centrality of nonverbal communication in culture, and particularly his concept of “congruence,” a maximizing of the potential within a cultural system of meaning, something which, Hall claims, “all writers are trying to achieve in terms of their own style, and what everyone wants to find as he/she moves through life” (131).

^{vi} For the crucial importance of nonverbal (and especially dance) languages, including in specific Afro-Latin contexts, see Joshua Hall (2020), part of a larger project that draws on Johnson.

^{vii} See Rosay.

^{viii} For more, see Lewis-Williams.

^{ix} See Castaneda. For a discussion of the debate regarding Castaneda’s inauthenticity, see Wallis 40-44.

^x To respect contemporary advances in gender theory and practice, I will use “they” and “their” as default pronouns when describing an individual whose gender is now known (including hypothetical individuals).

^{xi} Along with Dahms and Keating, whom I discuss at length below, for two additional scholars who advocate Anzaldúa as a shaman, see Lopez, and the following blog entry:

<https://globalsocialtheory.org/thinkers/anzaldua-gloria-evangelina/>.

^{xii} See Anzaldúa 2009.

^{xiii} See Anzaldúa 2000.

 References

- Adlam, Robert Adlam and Lorne Holyoak. "Shamanism in the Postmodern World: A Review Essay." *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 34, nos. 3-4, 2005, pp. 517-568.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2012.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman." *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, edited by AnaLouise Keating. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, pp. 121-23.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Haciendo caras, una entrada." *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990, pp. xv-xxvii.
- Castaneda, Carlos. *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1985.
- Chanady, Amaryll. "Identity, Politics, and *Mestizaje*." *Contemporary Latin American Cultural Studies*, edited by Stephen Hart and Richard A. Young. New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 192-202.
- Churchill, Ward. "Spiritual Hucksterism: The Rise of the Plastic Medicine Men." *Native Son: Selected Essays on Indigenism, 1985-1995*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999, pp. 355-366.
- Dahms, Betsy. "Shamanic Urgency and Two-Way Movement as Writing Style in the Works of Gloria Anzaldúa." *Letras Femeninas*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2012, pp. 9-27.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Glass, James M. "The Philosopher and the Shaman: The Political Vision as Incantation" *Political Theory*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1974, pp. 181-196.

-
- Hall, Edward T. *The Silent Language*. New York: Random House, 1990.
- Hall, Joshua. Book review of *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*, in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2018, pp. 280-293.
- Hall, Joshua. “Afro-Latin Dance as Reconstructive Gestural Discourse: The Figuration Philosophy of Dance on Salsa.” *Research in Dance Education* vol. 22, no. 1, 2020, pp. 73-87.
- Hobson, Geary. 2002. “The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 14, nos. 2-3, 2002, pp. 1-11.
- Holstein, Michael E. “The Writer as Shaman.” *Phenomenology of Life in a Dialogue between Chinese and Occidental Philosophy*, edited by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. New York: Springer, 1984, pp. 309-322.
- Johnson, Mark. *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Keating, AnaLouise. “Speculative Realism, Visionary Pragmatism, and Poet-Shamanic Aesthetics in Gloria Anzaldúa—and Beyond.” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 40, nos. 3-4, 2012, pp. 51-69.
- Keating, AnaLouise, editor. *Interviews/Entrevistas*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Kehoe, Alice. *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*. London: Waveland, 2000.
- Kuznetsova, Anna. “Shamanism and the Orphic Tradition.” *Publishing House: Siberian Branch Russian Academy of Sciences*, vol. 1, 2007, pp. 49-52.
- Lewis-Williams, David. *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002.

-
- Lopez, Estefany. "Curando La Herida: Shamanic Healing and Language in Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera." *Pathways: A Journal of Humanistic and Social Inquiry*, vol 1, 2019, https://repository.upenn.edu/pathways_journal/vol1/iss1/7.
- Rosay, André B. *Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men: 2010 Findings from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2016, NCJ 249736.
- Saldaña-Portillo, Josefina. "Who's the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón." *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, edited by Iliana Yamileth Rodriguez. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 402-423.
- Tedlock, Barbara. *The Woman in the Shaman's Body*. New York: Bantam, 2005.
- van Stuckrad, Kocku. "Reenchanting Nature: Modern Western Shamanism and Nineteenth-Century Thought." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2002, 771-799.
- Velazco y Trianosky, Gregory. "Mestizaje and Historical Identity." *A Companion to Latin American Philosophy*, edited by Susana Nuccetelli, Ofelia Schutte and Otávio Bueno. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 283-296.
- Vitebsky, Piers. *Shamanism*. Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 2001.
- Wallis, Robert J. *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archeologies and Contemporary Pagans*. London: Routledge, 2003.