

Anzaldúa's Snake-Bridge as Alternative to *Mestizaje*

ABSTRACT:

In this article, I offer the figure of the snake-bridge as (a) the coiled central metaphor in Gloria Anzaldúa's masterpiece, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, (b) the interpretive bridge connecting the early (*This Bridge Called My Back*) middle (*Borderlands*) and late (*Light in the Dark*) periods of her oeuvre, and (c) an alternate unifying metaphor to *mestizaje*. My first section offers a close reading of *Borderlands*, locating snake-bridge in the east-west snake of the Rio Grande that queer Chicana borderlanders cross north and south like snakes, while wrestling earthward with snake demons and skyward with snake goddesses. And my second section autopsies the dismembered snake-bridge in *Light in the Dark*, calling for a healing thereof in pursuit of a coalitional social justice politics that preserves the strengths of *mestizaje* without its dangers.

KEYWORDS: Gloria Anzaldúa; *mestizaje*; snakes; borderland; decolonization; social justice

The weightiest controversy in scholarship on Anzaldúa in the discipline of philosophy is that there is so little of it. Most academic philosophers still dismiss her as either illegitimate or unworthy of extended attention. In what little discussion has taken place, the primary debate has involved which chronological segment of Anzaldúa's thought is best, and most relevant today. Most have focused on what I consider her middle period, namely *Borderlands*, judging the late work as unacademically mystical.ⁱ Other philosophy scholars prefer her later work, namely *Light in the Dark*, viewing *Borderlands* as too narrowly political, thereby marginalizing her interest in spirituality and potentially excluding non-queer Chicana allies.ⁱⁱ Finally, her early work, on white feminism's discrimination against women of color, including *This Bridge Called My Back*, like most critiques by women of color, is mostly passed over in silence by white/Anglo scholars.

Outside the discipline of philosophy, the most important and controversial concept in Anzaldúa's oeuvre is found in *Borderlands*' subtitle, "The New Mestiza." Numerous critics observe that the indebtedness of the concept of *mestizaje* to explicit racial hierarchies enforced in the viceroyalties in Mexico City and Lima, the essentialist and racist thought of twentieth-century Mexican philosopher Jose Vasconcelos, and the Chicano movement with its internal sexism, homophobia, and anti-Native prejudice.ⁱⁱⁱ In this light, one considerable advantage of the present approach is that it sidesteps (or sidewinds) the controversy of *mestizaje* without sacrificing that concept's power to help weave together both the three periods of Anzaldúa's work, as well as the larger ambition to create a coalition for Latinx justice.

More precisely, I propose to shift from mestiza consciousness to the material, bodily, and place-centered concept of the "snake-bridge." In short, the bridge that is the back of women of color, spanning predominantly white feminism and predominantly male critical race theory and Chicano studies, is a hybrid figure—subject/object, human/animal—a bridge that moves, bending and curving itself, perhaps even circling back on itself. This mobility and flexibility is what allows the snake-bridge to also, in Anzaldúa's middle work, bridge the borders of *Frontera*, including the (1) national border between Mexico and the U.S., (2) the soul-divisions of queer Chicanas and the oppressive epochs of their history, and (3) the frontiers of the demonic and divine that they cross in order to survive and flourish. But this mobility and flexibility are also what makes the snake-bridge vulnerable to overstretching, beyond its structural integrity. Like *mestizaje*, the snake-bridge is rooted in Chicana geographical place, emphasizes embodiment, and possesses the power to unify. Unlike *mestizaje*, however, the snake-bridge bears no traces of

racial essentialism, is more concrete than abstract, and through its bridge aspect connotes social construction, as befitting a metaphor for a pluralistic social justice coalition.

Put in narrative form, Anzaldúa's snake-bridge began with the bodies of women of color resisting white discrimination, extended into queer Chicanas' survival in the Southwest, and is now strained to the breaking point trying to incorporate straight, white, male *Nepantleras*. The problem in Anzaldúa's later work, therefore, is not spirituality per se, the wholesale rejection of which tends to exclude women of color, who remain disproportionately poor and religious.^{iv} The problem lies with specific religious perspectives and practices, largely as a function of the situated embodiment of practitioners located furthest from the queer Chicana origin of the snake-bridge. Such practitioners tend to stretch the snake-bridge toward infinity, both horizontally to all human beings, and also vertically toward absolute conceptions of the divine and demonic. But this stretches the snake-bridge into a taut cord, unable to move in the ways that it must just to survive. My proposed solution, then, is to recoil the snake-bridge from this extreme, aiming for greater strength and stability, even at the cost of failing to reach conservative would-be allies.

Support for my conception of the snake-bridge can be found in contemporary biological research on snakes' distinctive methods of locomotion. Though there is some dispute regarding their exact number and the most apt labels, there are roughly four distinct types of snake locomotion: serpentine, concertina, caterpillar, and sidewinding. Each has an analogue and an implication for *Frontera's* borderlanders' movements. First, serpentine movement is a lateral shifting of body segment that somehow—in a way still not fully understood by scientists—propels the snake forward, including by using its rough scales to gain traction on the non-smooth parts of the ground and by ricocheting from environmental objects such as stones. Borderlanders, on Anzaldúa's account, must make constant "lateral" moves into their internal and external environments, and must also take advantage of imperfections and roughness on the ground they occupy in order to move forward—in a way that even the predominantly white community of social scientists cannot fully explain. Second, concertina movement consists of a bracing of the snake's tail-end curves, followed by a throwing-forward of its head and its front-most curves, and concluded by pulling forward its tail-end curves. This could be connected to the necessary risk, uncertainty, and future-directedness of borderlanders' movement, since they must always throw themselves into the next uncertain curve of their unpredictable home without resting in illusions of stability. Third, caterpillar movement involves an accordion-like contracting followed by an extension of spaced-out sections of the snake's body, which produces the same appearance as caterpillar's characteristic "inching along" locomotion. Borderlanders, too, must constantly pull their pasts forward, and use that to build enough internal complexity and tension to propel themselves into futures of their own choosing. Finally, sidewinding consists in throwing successive sections of the body to the side, from front to back, which looks something like a slinky toy rolling along the ground. Similarly, borderlanders sometimes need to engage in a kind of rolling, circuitous, sideways movement, exposing their entire bodies and requiring a corresponding shift in vision and orientation. They are, for example, vulnerable in their embodiment to racist law enforcement, classist corporate exploitation, and patriarchal and homophobic violence, among other oppressive forces and institutions, resistance to which injustices demands enormous flexibility and agility, in an exhausting, full-bodied barrage of counter-practices.

I. Building the Snake-Bridge in *Borderlands*

The many metaphors from *Borderlands* that constitute the snake-bridge can be sorted into three families. In the first family, snakes bridge the different parts of Anzaldúa's autobiographical reflections, which she calls *autohistoria/autohistoria-teoría*, "self-history" or "self-history theory." In the second family, snakes bridge the eras of Chicana history, including the reigns of the Olmecs, Aztecs, Spanish, Mexicans, Texans, and U.S. Americans. And in the final family, snakes bridge the demonic, human, and divine realms/states or ways of being.

Beginning with the first family, Anzaldúa's self-history, the first relevant reference in *Frontera* is found in Chapter 1, in a discussion of literal snakes. Anzaldúa grew up in a desert, in which Anglos had constructed canals for which there were "huge water pipes connected to underground water sources sticking up in the air" (31). The snake connection here is that, when they were children, Anzaldúa and her friends would "go fishing in some of those canals when they were full and hunt for snakes in them when they were dry (31). From these interactions, one can safely infer that Anzaldúa came to possess the kind of intimate knowledge of snakes that hunters tend to have of their usual prey. And in this way, these literal snakes became a bridge between Anzaldúa and the natural world.

Continuing with this "ground" theme is Chapter 2, "*Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan*," or "Movements of rebellion and the cultures that betray." When she became the first person in her family to leave home, Anzaldúa explains, "I didn't leave all the parts of me. I kept the ground of my own being. On it I walked away, taking with me the land, the Valley, Texas" (38). The snake connection here is that snakes, too, take the ground with them, as their scales slowly collect a buildup of dust and grime from the ground across which they move. Also, Anzaldúa here shifts the meaning of "ground," within the space of just one sentence, from something like "a metaphysical basis," to "a physical patch of territory." In like manner, borderlanders' metaphorical snakeskin is both a literal bridge between Mexico and the U.S. for the dusty matter of the borderland, and also a metaphorical bridge between literality and metaphor per se.

I now turn to my second category of snake-bridge metaphors in *Borderlands*, Chicana political history. The first reference concerns the present. In *Borderlands*' first prose sentence, Anzaldúa claims that "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [is an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (25). Similarly, a snake could aptly be described as grating across the ground, which recalls an analysis offered by Jane Caputi, in "Shifting the Shapes of Things to Come: The Presence of the Future in the Philosophy of Gloria Anzaldúa."^v In a discussion of shapeshifting, including the transformation of a human into a snake, Caputi traces the etymology of the "shape" in "shapeshifting" to the Old Norse *skap*, which she claims can also (a) mean "scratch," (b) refer to human genitals, especially "the female pudendum," and (c) be linked to the reproducing matter of a mother (190). The additional snake-bridge connections here, respectively, are that (a) snakes' belly also metaphorically scratch the ground as they move, (b) Anzaldúa claims (in an interview with Linda Smuckler) that she consciously intends the snake to be a symbol of female sexuality, and (c) Anzaldúa's central Aztec snake goddess, Coatlicue, is inherently maternal as world-creator (191).

This connection between "grating" and *skap* is buttressed by scientific observation of snakes, which has revealed that their scales are not actually as smooth as they feel to human hands. One can detect, particularly if one rubs them from "backwards" (from tail to head) a kind of one-directional roughness on the back each scale. Snakes use this roughness to generate sufficient traction to propel themselves forward over similarly non-smooth ground. This roughness is also implicated by the gradual wear-and-tear that necessitates snakes' shedding of

the skin. Called “molting,” it could also be understood as an analogue of the Third World’s bleeding as it “grates against the first” (25). That is, Mexican culture and its people are physically and psychologically wounded, excreting not only their lifeblood, but also the fluids and matter associated with their self-healing from those wounds. Similarly, a snake’s molted skin is evidence, not only of what has been lost after a difficult engagement with the inertial and gravitational forces of the earth, but also of the snake’s having created a new skin to match a new stage of its growth and survival.

This first paragraph of *Frontera* also contains Anzaldúa’s first reference to *atravesados*, literally “those who cross over,” which includes the following subgroups: “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the normal” (25). These bridging descriptors also hold true of snakes. To wit, snakes (a) possess narrow/squinted eyes; (b) are associated in the West, thanks to the myth of Eden, with perversity, queerness, and trouble; and (c) are depicted, since the devil’s alleged inhabiting of a snake in his seduction of Eve, as impure hybrids directed essentially toward violent death. The Torah depicts the snake as a possessed species punished by Yahweh for humanity’s fall. It claims the snake previously comported itself in an upright posture, but was forced to crawl on the ground after seducing Eve. From that crawling position, it is also prophesied to both wound, and be wounded by, humanity.

Turning to the origins of this oppression, Anzaldúa then discusses the Bering Strait theory of North American migration, and the hyper-masculinist Aztec conquest of present-day Mexico. According to legend, Anzaldúa relates, “an eagle with a writhing serpent in its beak perched on a cactus” at the site of Mexico City (27). In this image, she explains, the two juxtaposed animals “symbolize the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/earth/feminine” (27). Moreover, the nature of this juxtaposition reveals that “the patriarchal order had already vanquished the feminine and matriarchal order in pre-Columbian America” (27). In other words, the snake qua eagle’s prey is sacrificed in the process of bridging these dichotomies.

This bridging function only intensifies as Anzaldúa moves forward in history. First, she describes the birth of the Chicano people from the conquest-born combination of Indian and Spanish peoples. The snake connection here is that Chicanos possess roughly one fourth of the original snake, passed down through the Indian half of their ancestry. Second, in the next major historical event for the region, in “the 1800s, Anglos migrated illegally into Texas, which was then part of Mexico, and gradually drove the *Tejanos* (native Texans of Mexican descent) from their lands, committing all manner of atrocities against them,” ultimately leading to the current U.S.-Mexico border, “down 100 miles, from *el río Nueces* to *el río Grande*” (29). The snake connection here is that Rio Grande itself as sinuous and serpentine as a snake, and since it currently serves as thus makes the Mexico/Texas border serpentine too (29). In this way, snakes also serve as a series of historical bridges from the pre-Aztec to today.

On this note of predators and prey, and of crossing the Rio Grande serpent, Anzaldúa then offers the following description of undocumented immigrants attempting to cross invisible to the border patrol, which makes them sound like snakes:

Holding onto the grass, they pull themselves along the banks with a prayer to *Virgen de Guadalupe* [the Virgin of Guadalupe] on their lips: *Ay virgencita morena, mi madrequita, dame tu bendición* [Oh dark little virgin, my little mother, give me your blessing] (33).

Not only is the entire Rio Grande border metaphorically and literally like a snake, and not only are borderlanders snake-like beings who descend from the Indian peoples of the snake, and not

only do these serpentine borderlanders share the borderland with a multitude of literal snakes, but they also have to move like snakes when crossing that most perilous part of the national border. In other words, to bridge this most perilous national border, borderlanders have to engage in a multilayered imitation of—or transformation into—the bridge-like snake.

Turning to the phenomenological results of these painful crossings, Anzaldúa in Chapter 4 describes the painful process of self-realization, exploration and overcoming, in the following long passage centered on the metaphor of molting:

Every time she makes ‘sense’ out 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. It hampers her movement in the new territory, dragging the ghost of the past with her. It is a dry birth, a breech birth, a screaming birth, one that fights her every inch of the way. It is only when she is on the other side and the shell cracks open and the lid from her eyes lifts that she sees things in a different perspective. It is only then that she makes the connections, formulates the insights. It is only then that her consciousness expands a tiny notch, another rattle appears on the rattlesnake tail and the added growth slightly alters the sound she makes (71).

Here, Anzaldúa explicitly links the snake figure to “crossing over,” as in the mestiza *atravesado* borderlanders.

As for the third category of snake-bridge metaphors in *Frontera*, those that connect the human to the demonic and divine, its first instance is found in Chapter 2, in the book’s first reference to the “Shadow-Beast.” Anzaldúa describes it, initially, as “a rebel in me,” who “refuses to take orders from my conscious will,” and who as a result “threatens the sovereignty of my rulership” (38). The snake connection here is that the snake is arguably the paradigm case of a “beast of shadow.” For one thing, though a snake moves so low to the ground that it casts virtually no shadow itself, it thereby becomes a kind of metaphorical “shadow,” winding darkly beneath all the limbed animals that tread above it. For another thing, snakes also inhabit other shadows and dark places, and are associated with the shadow-world because of the myth of Eden’s linkage of snakes to the devil. And the bridge connection is that, in this quote, the snakelike Shadow-Beast is also a kind of bridge between Anzaldúa’s conscious and unconscious mind. Consider, for example, the following dream from the night after she was bitten by a rattlesnake:

rattler fangs filled by mouth, scaled covered my body. In the morning I saw through snake eyes, felt snake blood course through my body. The serpent, *mi tono* [match], my animal counterpart. I was immune to its venom. Forever immune.

Snakes, *viboras* [vipers]: since that day I’ve sought and shunned them. Always when they cross my path, fear and elation flood my body. I know things older than Freud, older than gender. She—that’s how I think of *la Vibora*, Snake Woman. Like the ancient Olmecs, I know Earth is a coiled Serpent. Forty years it’s taken me to enter the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul (48).

Here, Anzaldúa radically extends, compared to her previous deployments in *Frontera*, the snake figure’s scope and power. Now she depicts the earth itself—the source of everything given Anzaldúa’s nature-centric spirituality—as a snake. In this way, the serpent is elevated to the status of a kind of universal bridge, a covering over the entire earth that is indistinguishable from the separate literal and figurative places that the snake figure has previously bridged in *Frontera*, including Mexico and the U.S., and male and female genders.

For an example of the latter bridging, Anzaldúa writes that she, “like other queer people,” is “two in one body, both male and female... the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within” (41). There is also significant resistance to this bridging, however. Anzaldúa elaborates that “the female” is “feared” because of her connection to animality, which I would add includes fearsome animals like snakes (39). “Woman” per se, she writes, is “man’s recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast” (39). There are also complications here for queer women, at an internal level, in their relationships to the demonically serpentine Shadow-Beast. Anzaldúa explores this issue in some detail, introducing a kind of classification of different types of queer women.

To begin with, for queer women in the closet, there is the fear that the serpentine Beast “will break out of its cage” (42). Other queer women, Anzaldúa continues, “try to make ourselves conscious of the Shadow-Beast, stare at the sexual lust and lust for power and destruction we see on its face, discern among its features the undershadow that the reigning order of heterosexual males project on our Beast” (42). Still other queer women “try to waken the Shadow-Beast inside us,” with its “lidless serpent eyes” and “fangs bared”—but how, Anzaldúa asks, “does one put feathers on this particular serpent?” (42). And finally, some few queer women “have been lucky—on the face of the Shadow-Beast we have seen not lust but tenderness; on its face we have uncovered the lie” (42). This lie is the one that heterosexual males use to cause queer women to hate and fear their own sexuality. As for the “feathers” of the Beast, they derive from the “the feathered serpent” epithet of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl.^{vi} In recognition of this direct connection between the serpent and the Shadow-Beast, I will refer to the latter hereafter as the “Shadow-Serpent.”

Turning away from the downward bridge to the demonic, and toward the upward bridge to the divine, one of the central divine beings in *Borderlands* is the Aztec goddess Coatlalopeuh, the etymology of whose name means “she who has dominion over snakes.” Anzaldúa locates Coatlalopeuh within a complex genealogy resulting in the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico (45). Coatlalopeuh descends genealogically, Anzaldúa claims, from “*Coatlicue*, or Serpent Skirt,” originally depicted with a “human skull or serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet” (49). Moreover, as a “creator goddess,” Coatlicue was also “mother of the celestial deities” (49). The Aztecs, Anzaldúa explains, felt threatened, and therefore “drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities” (49). In other words, the snake qua Coatlicue had been, prior to the Aztec conquest, the metaphysical bridge between nothingness and being, nonexistence and existence. By splitting her in two, the Aztecs were attempting to prevent the conquered from crossing through her to their shared past.

To summarize this discussion of divinities, the snake bridges multiple goddesses, the most recent of whom bridges three different groups of people, although oppressive institutions such as the Catholic Church have taken advantage of the latter bridging for their own ends. Nevertheless, Anzaldúa manages to bring something of these snake goddesses into her own present, where the struggles and mediation continue. In Chapter 4, for example, she describes herself, after a painful ordeal, as “cradled in the arms of *Coatlicue*,” who “watches, the one who whispers in a slither of serpents” (72). Facing her, Anzaldúa trembles, “before the animal, the alien, the sub- or suprahuman, the me that has something in common with the wind and the trees and the rocks, that possesses a demon determination and ruthlessness beyond the human” (72).

II. Dismembered Snake-Bridges in *Light in the Dark*

Despite the centrality of the snake-bridge figure in *Borderlands*, it is increasingly denigrated in Anzaldúa's later work. I will attempt to show here that this misfortune for the snake-bridge suggests similar implications for Anzaldúa's thought. Before turning directly to her late work, I will first offer a brief overview of *Light in the Dark*'s central concepts, courtesy of AnaLouise Keating's introduction to her *EntreMundos* anthology. I will then argue for the compatibility of all five concepts with the snake-bridge, to raise the question as to why snakes fare so badly in *Light in the Dark*, no longer able to bear the bridged weights and connections that it did in *Frontera*.^{vii}

Keating's introduction identifies the following five central themes in Anzaldúa's later writings, most of which Keating claims were already at work in Anzaldúa's early and middle work: (1) *autohistoria/autohistoria-teoría*, (2) *nepantla*, (3) *nos/otras* [from "we"], (4) *conocimiento* [knowledge], and (5) *El Mundo Zurdo* [The Left-Handed World] (Keating 5). *Autohistoria/autohistoria-teoría* and *nepantla* I have already discussed above. *Nos/otras* is a juxtaposition of *nosotras* (Spanish for a feminine "we") and *otras* (Spanish for feminine "others"), and refers to the *nepantleras*, living on the slash between the two words, trying to overcome us/them divisions. *Conocimiento* is a kind of intimate, intuitive, spiritual knowledge, preeminently the faculty of such *nepantleras*. And *El Mundo Zurdo* refers to the ultimate queer community, in the broadest sense of the word, of *nepantlera* outcast/others bonding in creative coalitional alliance. All five resonate with the snake-bridge.

Like *autohistoria-teoría*, the end of a snake's body is a living record of its most recent movement, thereby bridging its past and future. Like *nepantla*, the snake always divides sideways from its forward motion, thereby bridging the two dimensions of its plane of motion. Like *nos/otras*, ever since the Eden myth, the snake has been the paradigmatic other to human selves, as both speaking animal, and consort of the seducing devil, thereby bridging the human, the nonhuman animal, and the divine. Like *conocimiento*, the snake's every movement requires intimate knowledge of objects in its environment, for purposes of pushing off those objects, thereby bridging the ecological organism/environment divide. And like *El Mundo Zurdo*, snakes remain associated, since Eden, with the left-handed, which is the etymological meaning of "sinister"; thus bridging good and evil, or in Nietzsche's terms, going beyond them.^{viii}

Snakes find themselves in jeopardy as early as the first line of Anzaldúa's "Preface" to *Light in the Dark*. The book's central goddess is Coyolxauhqui, the first female goddess not connected directly to snakes. Aztec myths claim she attempted to kill her own mother, Coatlicue, who (to repeat) is the most important snake goddess in *Frontera*. Coyolxauhqui's attempt was foiled by her brother Huitzilopochtli, a god of sun and war, who dismembered Coyolxauhqui and left her head in the sky.^{ix} Identified with the moon, the light in night's darkness, the severed head of Coyolxauhqui is also the prime mythological referent of the book's title, *Light in the Dark*. Keating notes that Anzaldúa "seriously considered titling her book *Enacting Nepantla: Rewriting History*," arguably a more promising alternative, since "Light in the Dark" hints at the kind of Cartesian dichotomies to which the book ultimately succumbs (xxxiv). Finally in regard to Coyolxauhqui, she is the basis, not only of the book's problematic title, but also of its central task, which Anzaldúa calls "the Coyolxauhqui imperative" (1). This imperative is "a struggle to reconstruct oneself and heal" from the wounds of discrimination, analogous to putting the goddess' body back together after her fraternal dismemberment (1).

The second sign of trouble for snakes in *Light in the Dark* appears on its second page. There, Anzaldúa introduces a non-capitalized spelling of the serpentine Shadow-Beast, and links

the beast to the book's prime nemesis, referring to the "shadow beast and attendant desconocimientos (the ignorance we cultivate to keep ourselves from knowledge so that we can remain unaccountable)" (2). In a third indication of trouble for the snake-bridge, Anzaldúa in *Light in the Dark* no longer italicizes non-English words, including Spanish and Nahuatl words. While this change admittedly suggests a kind of democratic equality among the three languages, the price of that equality is a minimization of each's unique differences. And as the snake figure is associated with both Nahuatl and Spanish, this graphic homogenization affects the snake as well. This same paragraph also includes a fourth sign of trouble for the snake. The paragraph's lone positive reference to shadows (namely "the positive shadow: hidden aspects of myself and the world") is later explained as referring to Coyolxauhqui's head/the moon, the light of which is a kind of metaphorical shadow of the sunlight it reflects to the earth (2).

Returning to Anzaldúa's ambivalence for the Shadow-Serpent, it recurs quickly in her "Preface" to *Light in the Dark*, and then on the second page of Chapter 1, "Let us be the healing of the wound," which title recalls Anzaldúa's call, twice in *Frontera*, to let the "wound caused by the serpent be healed by the serpent" (68). Here in *Light in the Dark*, however, Anzaldúa again links the snake to negativity, specifically with qualities including "numbness, anger, and disillusionment" (10). Worse still for the snake, Anzaldúa continues with a reference to "the collective shadow in the psyches of my culture and my nation" (10). Elaborating on this point, Anzaldúa again refers to a "shadow" of the U.S., which she then pluralizes as follows: "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). A few pages later, Anzaldúa returns to this theme, referring to "our desconocimientos [ignorance], our sombras [shadows]—the unacceptable attributes and unconscious forces a person must wrestle with to achieve integration" (16). Worst of all for the snake, Anzaldúa then reiterates the phrase "our collective shadow beasts," and names former President George W. "Bush as his cohorts" as "our collective psyche's darkest aspects," who in this form "represent the predators we must brave and whose fangs we must pull out" (16). In this last move, the Shadow-Serpent has gone from being the female part of herself that Anzaldúa had to learn to love, to being instead a former President Bush, a negatively "dark" being whom "we" must defang. Though Anzaldúa admits "that we all harbor a Bush-type raptor within our psyches," and that "Bush and his gang are not totally evil or one-dimensional," her picture of him remains a Cartesian dichotomous one, externalizing good and bad into opposing persons, rather than recognizing them as conflicted aspects of one's identity.

Finally from Chapter 1, Anzaldúa writes that "[w]hen fragmentations occur, you fall apart and feel as though you've been expelled from paradise," and adds that "Coyolxauhqui is my symbol" for this process, as well as for the integrations that can ensue (19). This reference to paradise of course recalls the myth of Eden, but this time the crime is an attempted murder of the Serpent—in the form of Coatlicue—by her daughter. Does this perhaps imply what Anzaldúa seems to perform repeatedly thus far in *Light in the Dark*: might her search for integration and paradise here require an attempt to kill the Serpent part of herself? "Let us be the healing of the world," she writes on the chapter's last page. But if one incorporates *Frontera*'s call to let the serpent heal the serpent's wound, does this later claim imply that we as Serpents caused the bite that wounded the world? If so, this might appear to blame the survivors of oppression for their oppression. That is, if this discussion amounts to an application of *Frontera*'s individual snake wounding-and-healing to a global context, the logical implication would appear to be that we as

Serpent must heal the world from the wound that we have given it. Put differently, by being more inclusive with her earlier metaphor—welcoming non-women, non-Chicanas, and non-queer women to be spiritual borderland serpents—the unintended consequence of the new snakes’ healing power is that all the snakes—even the Chicana queer “originals”—are collectively responsible for the wounds in our world. The problem is that this would appear to inappropriately distribute blame and responsibility to all, without regard for our different histories and ancestries. To clarify, I am not claiming that Anzaldúa consciously or explicitly blames queer Chicanas for the wounds of our world, but rather that this is an unconscious implication of this passage.

Perhaps, though, the serpent bite as wounding/healing does not apply here. If so, it would not have been we, qua Serpent, who caused the wound, which means that someone else would have to be blamed. This would appear to make the healing Serpent the hero of the story, engaged in a good-versus-evil struggle against conservative politicians as villains, labeled as shadow beasts identified with George W. Bush. This seems to suggest a dangerous slip toward what is not only dichotomous, and thus Cartesian, but also a moral/spiritual dichotomy, and thus Manichean. That is, in *Borderlands* the Shadow-Serpent is only apparently evil while actually part of the queer Chicana borderlander, a part she has despised and abjected due to internalized self-loathing, which she must reintegrate and revalue in order to be maximally healthy and empowered. Here in *Light in the Dark*, by contrast, this abjection appears complete, with the Shadow-Serpent rhetorically expelled from the good Serpent, existing independently as the quintessential villainous politician of that era.

Whatever the reason, and here I draw on Anzaldúa’s rhetoric at the end of Chapter 1—namely, that Coyolxauhqui’s “light is my medicine”—it appears this medicine has crossed over into poison. Or, to use the metaphor in Anzaldúa’s quote, perhaps Coyolxauhqui’s moonlight, though a mere reflection, is nonetheless still bright enough to blind Anzaldúa to the dark, maternal, serpentine parts of herself that she so courageously embraces in *Frontera*.

For reasons of space, I will now briefly consider two other moments that are similarly problematic in this vein. First, in Chapter 2, “Flights of the Imagination,” Anzaldúa invokes a tree of life whose roots, trunk and branches represent the “underworld,” “physical world” and “upper realities of spirit,” respectively (24-25). Although she clarifies that “these worlds aren’t separate,” and instead “occupy the same place,” her subsequent descriptions nevertheless reinforce this vertical hierarchy. For example, she locates snake spirits in the underworld with the other “animal spirits, and the dead who have not moved on to the next level of existence” (25). Whereas she locates the “gods and goddesses” and “spirits of the dead who have progressed beyond the land of the dead” in the upper reaches (26). Second, in the final chapter, 6, “now let us shift...conocimiento...inner work, public acts,” Anzaldúa invokes shadows and the Shadow-Serpent multiple times in describing a conflict between white women and women of color at a feminist conference. Here, as elsewhere in *Light in the Dark*, the Shadow Snake is deployed as a metaphor for unconscious negative thoughts and emotions, especially fear and racism. Then the prose body of the book ends, just one page after one last reference to “la Llorona/Cihuacoatl wailing,” to which Anzaldúa adds the following observation: “Your picture of her coiled serpent body with the head of a woman, shedding its skin, regenerating itself, reminds you of the snake story in Genesis” (155).

In conclusion, I have argued that the figure of the snake-bridge deserves a privileged place in the interpretation of Anzaldúa’s text, for three reasons. First, the snake-bridge ties together all the central metaphors in *Frontera*, and can thus serve as a helpful point of entry and

organizing motif for those who wish or need to use the text in teaching and/or application to some of the abovementioned real-world challenges. Second, the snake-bridge links Anzaldúa's early, middle, and later work, in a narrative form that is more thorough and productive than a purely typological "this thinker had three phases/periods" approach. Finally, the snake-bridge offers a concrete image for what is most productive in Anzaldúa's work, which enables us to critique that which is potentially counterproductive, as captured in the continuing critique of *mestizaje* as both racially essentialist and overly abstract. Though it is of course crucial to reach as many allies as possible, and to be maximally inclusive, it is equally important to keep the bridging serpent healthy. To facilitate the mobility and flexibility it needs to survive. To fight another day for the most vulnerable *nepantleras*, in today's most precarious borderlands.

Notes

ⁱ Anzaldúa 2007. See, for example, Lugones 2005, Ortega 2016, Cisneros 2013, Pitts 2014, and Wright 1998.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Bost 2015, Hernández-Ávila 2005, Keating, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Beltran 2004, Chanady 2003, Vazquez 2006, and Velazco y Trianosky 2013.

^{iv} See Collins 1998.

^v See Caputi 2005.

^{vi} As Hernández-Ávila notes, this title "is a direct reference to La Serpiente Emplumada, Quetzalcoatl, the sacred being of MesoAmerica who represents the highest plane, the highest energy to which humans can aspire" (233). More specifically, Ehécatl, "as a manifestation of Quetzalcoatl, appears as the NightWind—invisible and intangible" (234).

^{vii} For more on the complexities and apparent contradictions, both in Anzaldúa's late work and throughout her career, see Bost's archival analysis.

^{viii} For more on the ways that Anzaldúa takes up and surpasses Nietzsche, see El Moncef 2003. In brief, El Moncef argues that Anzaldúa shares Nietzsche's emphasis on transnational self-overcoming, but exceeds him by "actualizing," "radicalizing" and "superseding" this movement (47-48).

^{ix} For more on Coatlicue, see Klein 2008.

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