

Resistance in Writing: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*

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But always I go against a resistance. Something in me does not want to do this writing. (93)

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

It has become, it seems, a foregone conclusion that the political essence of Chicano literature is to be found in its distinct capacity to evoke or instantiate resistant effects. Whether discerned from its portrayals of Chicano life or symbolized by the very texts themselves, Chicano literature draws political attention precisely because it more or less implies, or asserts outright, resistance of some kind. To be sure, the resistant effects of Chicano literature are nothing less than the traces of an historical necessity for cultural, economic, ethnic, linguistic, political, sexual, and social survival. Such resistant effects are symptomatic of a history of oppression, of a subjection to repressive power relations, in which Chicanos have participated as the agents of incessant struggle. In *Chicano Narrative*, noted critic Ramón Saldívar

surmises that “[t]ogether, the body of texts that have been produced in response to this history constitute the Chicano resistance to the cultural hegemony of dominant Anglo-American civil society” (24). Having been historically oppressed and resisted by this Anglo-American civil society, Chicanos have in turn countered with a like resistance of their own. And literature is but one register of many through which Chicanos have exercised their imperative of resistance. As has become widely acknowledged, both within and beyond the walls of the academy, Gloria Anzaldúa’s seminal work of Chicano literature *Borderlands/La Frontera* occupies a unique space within the history of Chicano resistance. In gauging the level of critical and celebratory attention it has garnered, *Borderlands/La Frontera* has arguably achieved at least a semblance of canonicity within the annals of Chicano literature and subaltern feminist studies. Yet, today, as we are beckoned by intellectual admiration and personal respect to the posthumous task of debating the legacy of a giant in feminist and queer studies, it is not an unlikely surprise that Anzaldúa’s work altogether resists such easy ascription so as to point the compass of critical knowledge in the direction of unforeseen discoveries.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa discloses an unassuming, yet ever so fundamental, dimension of the history of Chicano resistance. This dimension of Chicano resistance is the resistance that is inherent to the very writing¹ of Chicano texts, the resistance that plagues the psyche of the Chicano writer when producing texts. In the sixth chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the chapter entitled “*Tlilli, Tlapalli/The Path of the Red and Black Ink*,” Anzaldúa, in effect, has “written of writing” (Derrida, 103).² In this chapter she has taken her own writing as an object of analysis. Certainly, the taking of one’s own writing as an object of analysis is nothing all that noteworthy. For, as Trinh T. Minh-ha explains in *Woman, Native, Other*, by necessity “[w]riting reflects” (23). “It reflects on other writings,” she explains, “and, whenever awareness emerges, on itself as writing” (23). In chapter six of *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa indeed reflects on her writing. Yet, what is curious with regards to the history of Chicano resistance is that in this chapter Anzaldúa alludes to a psychic frontier of resistance that operates concomitantly with the political resistance exerted and exemplified by her writing. She alludes to a psychic resistance that the Chicano writer struggles against in the very practice of writing itself. In this chapter she reveals in graphic detail an insidious experience in the history of Chicano resistance that is located at the site of writing. In addition to its demonstration of the political resistance *of* writing, the chapter entitled “*Tlilli,*

Tlapalli/The Path of the Red and Black Ink in *Borderlands/La Frontera* explores a psychic resistance experienced *in* writing itself.

Throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa seeks to capture in written form a Chicano cultural imaginary,³ a psychic terrain marred by the traumas of colonialism, economic exploitation, geographic dispossession, racism, and sexism. The bridge that Anzaldúa seeks to build between the Chicano cultural imaginary and the written text corresponds to the always already unstable bridge that exists between the psychoanalytic orders of the imaginary and the symbolic. This analogy, if nothing else, serves to theoretically situate the site of Anzaldúa's writing as that very unstable bridge between the imaginary and the symbolic.⁴ Upon this bridge, or indeed at the very site of Anzaldúa's writing, a certain tension persists between image and word, between the imaginary and the symbolic. It is a tension intrinsic to the abyss separating what is imagined from how something is *meant* to be imagined.

Whereas it grants her the privilege of textual voice, of commentary and rebuttal, Anzaldúa detects in writing the dissimulation of the intimacy of her images. "Images" she claims, "are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious" (91). She envisions her writing as a bridge suspended over and across the abyss separating "evoked emotion and conscious knowledge" (91). Across this bridge - that is to say, through her writing - she transports in words the images dwelling within her psyche and subsequently delivers them to the outside world in the form of texts. Words sustain her writing. "[W]ords are the cables that hold up the bridge" (91), she says. Writing allows for the outward/*outword* projection of images, a task that brings her much joy. Yet, intrinsic to this work are interferences that intermittently bring her writing to frustrating halts. She recounts how she recurrently encounters obstacles in this written channeling of her psychic images. Overall, her writing can be characterized as a perpetual cycle of creative satisfaction and anxious interruption. The presence of such incessant wavering in the process of her writing signals that a certain network of resistance is at play, a certain network of political and psychic resistances impelled by her writing.

On the one hand, her writing enables a narrative of political resistance against a history of oppression that continues to traumatize her psyche with cultural contradiction. The cultural tugs at play within her contradictory condition, tugs that extend from Euroamerican, Mexican, Native American, and Spanish influences, create an open wound, "*una herida abierta*" (25). It is this vexed existence with

which her psyche must struggle on a daily basis. And even her treasured writing is no less implicated in her troubled existence. "I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one" (95), she says. Still, she draws inspiration for her writing out of this tumultuous wellspring of uncertainty, from the cultural contradiction that festers within her psyche:

Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create. It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper, and I keep aggravating it by poking at it. When it begins to fester I have to do something to put an end to the aggravation and to figure out why I have it. I get deep down in the place where it's rooted in my skin and pluck away at it, playing it like a musical instrument –the fingers pressing making the pain worse before it can get better. Then out it comes. No more discomfort, no more ambivalence. Until another needle pierces the skin. That's what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be. (95)

Accordingly, Anzaldúa formulates her now famous feminist epistemology of the borderlands,⁵ one she calls the "new mestiza consciousness." It entails a deconstructive reading of a Chicano culture possessed by cultural contradiction, a Chicano culture intimately familiar with the legacy of colonialism in the U.S. Southwest. Rendered "*la facultad*," the new mestiza consciousness consists of a capacity "to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface" (60). This faculty of introspection, when directed at her own writing, seemingly drives Anzaldúa to the brink of psychosis in chapter six, the chapter entitled "*Tlilli, Tlapalli*/The Path of the Red and Black Ink." What she finds hidden deep beneath the surface of her writing are the seeds of its own betrayal. Here, a less conspicuous but no less significant bit of resistance makes its appearance at the site of her writing. At once, she becomes aware of the sacrificial paradox of her writing, of her obsessive offering of words to the fleeting images in her mind that resist written recuperation. She describes in wrenching detail how she hardly sustains the anxious interludes that accompany the interruptions imposed on her writing by these images. These interruptions, in conjunction with the overall political message of her written narrative, represent dual instances of resistance locatable at the site of her writing. The psychic resistance to be found at the site of

her writing is alluded to in no small way when she says that “[w]riting produces anxiety” (94).

It is necessary, I feel, to explain that I am taking certain liberties with my use of the psychoanalytic concept of resistance. It is a consequence of the allure of psychoanalysis as a mode for reading literary texts. Surely it comes as no surprise that the concept of resistance, not unlike other psychoanalytic concepts, lends itself to creative and unintended adaptations beyond its originally intended appropriation in the field of psychoanalysis. My own intent, however, is to mobilize the psychoanalytic concept of resistance in order to gauge the political and psychic pressures, as it were, exerted at the site of Anzaldúa's writing. As mentioned, Anzaldúa's writing is thicketed in a paradoxical network of resistances. That is, the psychic resistance signaled by the interruptions in Anzaldúa's writing is concomitant with a more obvious political resistance exercised through her written narrative against the psychic residues left by a history of oppression. In her written construal of a political message of resistance, Anzaldúa recurrently encounters an insidious strain of psychic resistance within the practice of her very own writing. Such psychic resistance emerges only as a consequence of the discursive attempt to recuperate images through the symbolic medium of writing. For it is at the level of written discourse where this resistance is registered as interruption. These instances of resistance are alluded to in chapter six by way of subtle admissions by Anzaldúa herself that situate the site of her writing amid “the pitched fight between the inner image and the words trying to recreate it” (96).

Allow me to digress a bit further if only to explain why the psychoanalytic theory of resistance appeals to my reading of *Borderlands/La Frontera*. I understand the discourses of psychoanalysis and Chicano studies as similar investitures seeking to actualize experiences that have been repressed. To learn from psychoanalysis a reading such as mine must draw upon the clinical association made between the phenomenon of resistance and the patient's repressed history during analysis. If only by analogy, a certain connection can be made between psychoanalysis and Chicano studies as therapeutic interventions. That is, both can be recognized as discursive commitments that seek the recovery and reconstruction of embittered repressions that have been withheld from conscious existence.

To be sure, Lacanian psychoanalysis maintains that resistance is a phenomenon proper to the discourse shared by analyst and subject alike, and is

therefore not to be "considered from the point of view of the subject's psychic properties" (Lacan *Freud*, 127). As Jacques Lacan states, "resistance is not thought of as being internal to the subject, on a psychological level, but uniquely in relation to the work of interpretation" (127). In analysis, the phenomenon of resistance emerges as a "negative therapeutic reaction" (Lacan *Écrits*, 13)⁶ on the part of the subject in direct response to suggestive questioning posed by the analyst. Through this questioning, the analyst aims to loosen the repression, the pathogenic complex, inured in the unconscious of the subject. But the analyst does not struggle against resistances raised by the repressed itself. As Sigmund Freud explains, "it [the repressed] has no other endeavor than to break through the pressure weighing down on it and force its way either to consciousness or to a discharge through some real action" (20). Rather, the phenomenon of resistance is an unwilling act of anticathexis. The subject unwittingly contests the analyst's advances to "avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed" (21).

Writing for Anzaldúa is her chosen discursive medium by which to politically resist the psychic traumas inflicted by a history of oppression, and for concomitantly expelling and creating meaning out of the repressed images associated with this condition. She clearly states in the following how these traumas are viscerally associated with the images that necessitate a written healing.

When I don't write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I *do* write. I can't stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make 'sense' of them, and once they have 'meaning' they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy. (92)

It is by virtue of her writing that Anzaldúa is able to assemble, make meaningful, and altogether bring some semblance of (symbolic) order to the imaginary chaos in her psyche, a condition she claims is not unfamiliar to many of her fellow Chicanas in the U.S. —Mexico borderlands— *las mestizas*.

From the outset, Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* invokes an alliance of political resistance with *la mestiza*, one forged by a hybrid subjectivity marked by a

history of repression and silence. But as the one with the tool of writing at her disposal, Anzaldúa makes it known in no uncertain terms that in this lone text, in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she intends to speak on behalf - that is, for - *la mestiza*. In view of the fact that she is presenting the heretofore repressed and silenced history of *la mestiza*, Anzaldúa calls particular attention to the nuance of her written exposition as an inaugural moment in *la mestiza's* intellectual development - a moment of critical self-reflection. Synchronically, the emergence of this inaugural moment in the history of *la mestiza's* consciousness is claimed by Anzaldúa to be taking place with the writing of her text. In short, it is taking place at the site of her writing. Upon this new awareness she confers the title of “a new mestiza consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*” (99). “It is a consciousness of the Borderlands” (99), she says. And she submits her text to readers as “our invitation to you –from the *new mestizas*” (20). In effect, Anzaldúa’s writing serves as a centrifugal point from which the *new mestiza* speaks, and thus resists her imposed silence.

More than a hail from the margin and more than a salutary plea for recognition of *la mestiza's* historical repression and silence, Anzaldúa’s text is meant to exhibit by its very written production a discursive political resistance by virtue of the attention afforded to the abject existence of *la mestiza*. The very presence of *Borderlands/La Frontera* within the textual economy of American and postcolonial literatures is itself symbolic of political resistance. But how such political resistance is performed within the text's narrative is not in the manner of a diatribe, for Anzaldúa understands that indeed “[a] counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence” (100). Rather, and all the while aware of the pitfalls of cultural essentialism that would stigmatize the historicity of *la mestiza* if presented in an uncomplicated narrative schema of oppressor and oppressed, Anzaldúa conducts an auto-critique of her own experiences so as to open the possibility of infinite sites of identification between herself and a virtual readership. The experience of *la mestiza* functions as the epistemological optic through which a history of oppression is re-interpreted and re-written against previously inaccurate, silencing, and demeaning portrayals. In doing so, she renders a more complex picture of the troubled psyche of *la mestiza* that informs such revisionist work.

These numerous [cultural] possibilities leave *la mestiza* floundering in uncharted seas. In perceiving conflicting information and points of

view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (101)

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, specifically chapter six, Anzaldúa assembles a narrative of her own psychic unrest as a writer. Her writing is a therapeutic cathexis, an investment of emotional significance in an activity that allows her to attempt to control, shape, and transform the vexed images in her psyche. It is through writing that she endows these images with significance, thus giving them a purpose other than the dissolution of her sanity. The images occupy every available space of her psyche. They are what impel her to write. "The stress of living with cultural ambiguity" she says, "both compels me to write and blocks me" (96). But it is only because of her written discourse that these images are given any semblance of (symbolic) order at all. For without the written ordering of what she imagines she could not appropriate meaning to her life. "I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become" (93), she says. Her life is sustained by her writing. Indeed, Anzaldúa claims to make sense of the utter disarray of her psyche through her writing. To be sure, it is not just her own writing that she yearns. She admits that she also needs the writing of others. "Books saved my sanity," she says, "knowledge opened the locked places in me and taught me first how to survive and then how to soar" (19). It is precisely because of the (symbolic) order given to her psyche by written discourse that she is able to make her existence meaningful.

Likewise, the site of discourse in psychoanalysis is no less pivotal to the construction of meaning. That is, in analysis the discourse binding subject and analyst becomes the shared grounds on which the brokering for possession of the repressed is conducted. The analyst, in a way, seeks to possess the repressed contents of the subject's psyche through the lure of suggestive questioning. The subject, on the

other hand, seeks to maintain possession of the repressed by unwittingly postponing the release of incriminating details in responding to the analyst's questions. Respective demands for possession of the repressed are writ by both subject and analyst in the field of discourse. By virtue of this discourse and its exchanges the subject apprehends in passing the existential presence of oneself and the analyst. "It is within the movement in which the subject acknowledges himself" states Lacan, "that a phenomenon which is resistance appears" (*Freud*, 41). It is only within the field of discourse where the phenomenon of resistance emerges. Therefore, the subject issues *discursive resistance* against the *discursive advances* of the analyst. And it is precisely the repeated occasions of resistance within discourse during analysis that account for interferences in the work of interpreting – that is, achieving meaning of – the repressed. It is only when the demands of the resistance become too great for the subject to satisfy any longer, only when the barrier of resistance is finally breached by the demands of the analyst's questioning, that the repressed is made interpretable through transference.⁷

In the network of resistance operating at the site of Anzaldúa's own written discourse, we see that the interruptions imposed on her writing elicit feelings of anxiety.

Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer – a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen. (94)

These interruptions occur as she attempts through her written discourse – if you will, through her transference – to interpret and make sense of the images. As this writing hits its so-called "walls," she undergoes bouts of nauseating anxiety. In the psychoanalytic session, no less, the subject often experiences similar moments of anxiety as interruptions impede the discursive transference:

The moment when the subject interrupts himself is usually the most significant moment in his approach toward the truth. At this point we gain a sense of the resistance in its pure state, which culminates in the

feeling, often tinged with anxiety, of the analyst's presence. (Lacan *Freud*, 52)

Not unlike the analytic situation, Anzaldúa's anxious moments serve as a paradoxical prelude to more discourse. That is, by writing she seeks to get past the very resistance she encounters in her writing. During these anxious moments, writing becomes for Anzaldúa the preferred therapeutic option for overcoming the resistance in her writing. Paradoxically, the angst that accompanies these instances of interruption is a signal to her that she must use her writing to get past the resistance imposed by the images.

Anzaldúa's own efforts at surpassing these interruptions and the analyst's incessant questioning of the subject, prove to be analogous situations in so far as attempts are made in both to discursively overcome their respective strains of self-defeating resistance. The subject in analysis, much like a skipping rock off the surface of a lake, skims from one question to the next while unwittingly resisting the analyst's invitations to symbolically integrate the repressed contents of the psyche. The proliferation of discourse in the psychoanalytic session is perpetuated, in part, by repetitive encounters with a stubborn resistance. Likewise, to overcome it the analyst must match the repetitive emergence of resistance by repetitively issuing questions to the subject. And it is this repetitive interface of questions and resistance that propels the continuation of discursive exchange between the analyst and the subject. Similarly, Anzaldúa's anxiety with writing incites so many vigorous attempts on her part to overcome the impeding resistance in her writing. By undertaking her own self-analysis Anzaldúa arrives at the realization that, in order to overcome the resistance in her writing, she must repetitively attempt to write, in spite of the resistance, so as to pursue the symbolic integration of the troubling images infecting her psyche.⁸ This integration, of course, can be achieved through her writing. Referring to herself in the third person so as to maintain a certain analytical distance from her anxious state, Anzaldúa in the following passage explains what is at stake in her attempts at symbolic integration.

She is getting too close to the mouth of the abyss. She is teetering on the edge, trying to balance while she makes up her mind whether to jump in or to find a safer way down. That's why she makes herself sick –to postpone having to jump blindfolded into the abyss of her

own being and there in the depths confront her face, the face underneath the mask. (96)

Unable to make sense of her existence outside the discursive medium of writing, she must find a way to “postpone having to jump blindfolded into the abyss of her own being and there in the depths confront her face, the face underneath the mask.” Paradoxically, the postponement imposed on her writing by a certain psychic resistance must be met by a like postponement. That is, she must in turn postpone the psychic resistance imposed on her writing. She must, in effect, resist resistance. And only by writing can this be done. The postponement of the psychic resistance impeding her writing can only be achieved by regaining the semblance of (symbolic) order that her written discourse permits. As Lacan explains, “this ‘I’ who, in order to admit its facticity to existential criticism, opposes its irreducible inertia of pretences and *méconnaissances* to the concrete problematic of the realization of the subject” (*Écrits*, 15). In other words, and to avoid falling into the abyss of utter disarray alluded to by Anzaldúa, the subject must assert that it exists as a cohesive unit, that it exists as a subject. For Anzaldúa, she must seek to reclaim her subjectivity, her place in the symbolic order, her place in discourse, through writing:

It isn't until I'm almost at the end of the blocked state that I remember and recognize it for what it is. As soon as this happens, the piercing light of awareness melts the block and I accept the deep and the darkness and I hear one of my voices saying, 'I am tired of fighting. I surrender. I give up, let go, let the walls fall. On this night of the hearing of faults, Tlazolteotl, diosa de la cara negra [black faced goddess] let fall the cockroaches that live in my hair, the rats that nestle in my skull. Gouge out my lame eyes, route my demon from its nocturnal cave. Set torch to the tiger that stalks me. Loosen the dead faces gnawing at my cheekbones. I am tired of resisting. I surrender. I give up, let go, let the walls fall.' (96, my translation)

Her eventual surrender allows her to, once again, proceed unencumbered with her writing.

Anzaldúa's encounters with these “walls,” what she refers to as “*Coatlicue* states” (96),⁹ interrupt the interpretive progress she seeks to achieve through her writing. Curiously, however, the very discursive medium she chooses for travelling

this journey of self-understanding is itself a site of contestation and uncertainty. This, of course, is the site of her writing:

To write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice for the images. I have to believe that I can communicate with images and words and that I can do it well. A lack of belief in my creative self is a lack of belief in my total self and vice versa –I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one. (95)

This battle of self-understanding that is waged through her writing spares no aspect of her life; not even the discursive medium of writing itself. In a way, she turns writing on itself with the intention of inaugurating an understanding of what her writing means. That is, she seeks to gain an understanding of her writing by writing about it. Upon reflecting on writing itself, she discovers that "[t]he whole thing has a mind of its own, escaping me and insisting on putting together the pieces of its own puzzle with minimal direction from my will" (Anzaldúa 88). What she is suggesting is that her writing seems to take over, that the meaning she intends to contain through the words that she chooses exceeds or spills over its intended discursive boundaries. Thus her writing, and by extension the text itself, is not within her control. And the site of her writing sits precisely on that liminal ground between the inside and outside of the symbolic, between that which is discursively constituted and that which exceeds discursive constitution, between the realms of the symbolic and the imaginary. Her writing, in effect, registers these transgressions, these unstable border crossings between the imaginary and the symbolic, during those anxious interludes of psychic resistance.

Such a sensibility of haplessness on the part of Anzaldúa extends from her realization that the text produced by her written discourse is inherently heterogeneous and symbolically unfixable. The text does not belong to her, but rather to the reader. But in classic Anzaldúean fashion, her inquisitiveness about all aspects of her life compels her to seek a certain reconciliatory understanding about her writing. In doing so she acknowledges the fact that her life and writing, which are inextricable, are laden with perpetual contradiction and uncertainty. Her writing, she says,

is a rebellious willful entity, a precocious girl-child forced to grow up too quickly, rough, unyielding, with pieces of feather sticking out here and there, fur, twigs, clay. My child, but not for much longer. This female being is angry, sad, joyful, is *Coatlicue*, dove, horse, serpent, cactus. Though it is a flawed thing –a clumsy, complex, groping blind thing– for me it is alive, infused with spirit. I talk to it; it talks to me. (89)

In this reconciliatory endeavor of self-understanding, the threat of symbolic excess, of symbolic disintegration, is realized in the images that precede her writing. As Trinh T. Mihn-ha contends about writers in general, "we persist in trying to fix a fleeting image and spend our lifetime searching after that which does not exist" (22). Anzaldúa comes to terms with the radical potential of her writing to create unintended meaning.¹⁰ And she also comes to terms with the fact that such symbolic uncertainty is the consequence of an imaginary order that is always in flux. She arrives at a personal appreciation for the logical circularity, the repetitiveness, of the relationship she shares with her writing:

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. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else. (95)

Anzaldúa's reflections in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, specifically the sixth chapter entitled "*Tilli, Tlapalli*/The Path of the Red and Black Ink," suggest that the discursive site of her writing shares an uncanny resemblance to the field of discourse in psychoanalysis. In both instances resistance is registered at the level of discourse. However, in Anzaldúa's case there is a dual significance to resistance at the discursive site of her writing. On the one hand, a political resistance against a history of oppression is exercised through her writing. The ordering of the traumatic images in her mind is made possible by her written discourse. Meaning is made of her life through the symbolic ordering permitted by her writing. However, there is also a certain psychic resistance inherent to the very practice of her written discourse that accounts for its occasional ceasing. The interruptions imposed on her writing elicit

feelings of anxiety within her. Paradoxically, she turns to writing as the necessary therapy to overcome the resistance in her writing. For Anzaldúa, writing consists of a perpetual struggle waged between images and words. “Words” she says, “are blades of grass pushing past the obstacles, sprouting on the page” (93). Her writing is the very site of a struggle, of a psychic resistance, that bridges the abyss separating the psychoanalytic orders of the imaginary and the symbolic. Without fail, and in repetitive fashion, a persistent tension between the imaginary and the symbolic is registered at the site of Anzaldúa’s writing as psychic resistance:

To be a mouth –the cost is too high– her whole life enslaved to that devouring mouth. Todo pasaba por esa boca, el viento, el fuego, los mares y la Tierra [Everything passed through that mouth, the wind, the fire, the seas, the earth]. Her body, a crossroads, a fragile bridge, cannot support the tons of cargo passing through it. She wants to install ‘stop’ and ‘go’ signal lights, instigate a curfew, police. Poetry. But something wants to come out. (96, my translation)

Notes

¹ It is the empirical concept of writing that is to be assumed throughout the following discussion. For it is precisely this sense of writing –“an intelligible system of notations on a material substance” (Spivak xxxix)– that Anzaldúa intends in chapter six of *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

² This phrase, “written of writing,” appears in *Of Grammatology* by Jacques Derrida. Derrida uses the phrase to describe what structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss performs in *Tristes Tropiques* (294-304) when self-consciously reflecting upon the observable differences between his own trained writing and the seemingly unintelligible “writing” of the Nambikwara. “For Lévi-Strauss has written of writing” (103) states Derrida. The passage in *Of Grammatology* continues as follows: “Only a few pages, to be sure, but in many respects remarkable; very fine pages, calculated to amaze, enunciating in the form of paradox and modernity the anathema that the Western world has obstinately mulled over, the exclusion by which it has constituted and recognized itself, from the *Phaedrus* to the *Course in*

General Linguistics” (Derrida 103). Anzaldúa’s own reflection on her own writing, to be sure, is no less remarkable, amazing, and paradoxical.

³ By fusing “cultural” and “imaginary,” terms no doubt riddled with meaning, I locate the intimate repository of memory-images that, for Anzaldúa, conjure a past reality distinctly identified by her as “Chicano/a.” These are the very images that at once furnish and resist her writing. While the psychic spontaneity of these images renders them irreducible to the fixity of written recuperation, they are nevertheless mirrored by writing and discerned in some fashion when read. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, writing is the precarious site of exchange, the mirror so to speak, in the translation of the cultural imaginary into written text.

⁴ In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler contends “the imaginary signifies the impossibility of the discursive - that is, symbolic –constitution of identity” (96-97). She adds that “[i]dentity can never be fully totalized by the symbolic, for what it fails to order will emerge within the imaginary as a disorder, a site where identity is contested” (Butler 97). There is, then, always already a discord between the psychoanalytic orders of the imaginary and the symbolic.

⁵ Anzaldúa is recurrently credited with coining, or at least propagating, the term “borderland.” “Borderlands” she states, “are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (19). Elsewhere in the text she states that “[a] borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The forbidden are its inhabitants” (25). “Borderland” has become a convenient trope to describe instances of discontinuity, rupture, syncretic heterogeneity, contradiction. Perhaps, then, it is the term’s inherent ambiguity –with its perpetual unfixability and resignifiability– that has accounted for its proliferation and appeal across a wide range of revisionist discourses. Susan Stanford Friedman remarks that “[i]ts impact across the disciplines is not for its articulation of difference but rather for its complication of difference” (93). Due to its transitory appropriation and meaning, “borderland” is in itself a concept of resistance. That is, it is a concept that inherently resists symbolic fixity.

⁶ In his paper “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis,” Lacan offers the following expression to illustrate the hidden logic behind the subject’s “negative therapeutic reaction” in analysis: “I can’t bear the thought of being freed by anyone other than myself” (13).

⁷ In Lacanian psychoanalysis “transference” is understood to be associated with the fantasy of the “subject presumed to know.”

⁸ In an earlier chapter entitled “*La Herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue State*,” Anzaldúa discusses the association between addiction and the act of repetition. Without question, writing for Anzaldúa is an addiction. Therefore, the following passage, when considered in association with her addiction to writing, suggests that Anzaldúa repetitively struggles to revive her writing when faced with the repetitive presence of a resistance in a manner that is not unlike the obstacle of resistance encountered in the psychoanalytic session. “An addiction (repetitious act) is a ritual to help one through a trying time; its repetition safeguards the passage, it becomes one’s talisman, one’s touchstone. If it sticks around after having outlived its usefulness, we become ‘stuck’ in it and it takes possession of us. But we need to be arrested. Some past experience or condition has created this need. This stopping is a survival mechanism, but one which must vanish when it’s no longer needed if growth is to occur” (68). To continue to grow, to continue to make meaning out of the images, Anzaldúa must turn to writing. She must turn to writing not only to make meaning, but also to move past the occasional resistance posed to her writing by the images. She must resist the resistances in her writing with writing.

⁹ In chapter four of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, –“*La Herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue State*”– Anzaldúa explains the *Coatlicue* state as the condition of being frozen in stasis by the onset of contradiction. Curiously, this state is not, as Anzaldúa contends, “immobility” (69). Rather, it is a prelude to an understanding of the fixations of contradiction. As she says, “[m]y resistance, my refusal to know some truth about myself brings on that paralysis, depression –brings on the *Coatlicue* state” (70). It is the ambivalence of non-knowledge that impels her to want to know. By knowing she can move. As she states, “if I escape conscious awareness, escape ‘knowing,’ I won’t be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious” (70).

¹⁰ These considerations, no doubt, insinuate certain textual effects related to the “death of the author” (Barthes 142-148). While such a reading of Anzaldúa and *Borderlands/La Frontera* would certainly be interesting and provocative, at present such a venture would, unfortunately, deviate the discussion away from the problematic of resistance.

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