

# A Language That Speaks of What Is Other: A Ruptured Body Amid/Against Violence in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987)

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## Synopsis

This article explores how Gloria Anzaldúa depicts non-unitary subjectivity or borderland states of existence in one of her works, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. It will place special focus on the representation of wounds and ruptured body depicted in the text and ponder over its ethical relation with the other.

First, it will investigate how Anzaldúa depicts her borderland states of existence in the first half of *Borderlands/La Frontera*. It will especially focus on the depiction of wounds of the disenfranchised and how Anzaldúa tries to deal with those wounds and pains caused by the violent regime. It will analyze the transition that occurs on her body, which is prompted by her wound or pain caused by her peculiar locality or predicament. It will minutely follow the text and examine how the transition or process is depicted and how her wound eventually opens itself up to the other. By referring to some theories such as theoretical contemplation on subjectivity, violence and alterity and psychoanalytic redemption on death drive argued by Butler, Deleuze, Spivak, and other scholars who mentioned Anzaldúa's thoughts and works to explore some clues for understanding Anzaldúa's literary expressions, it will discuss why negative, grotesque or visceral subject matter such as wound or pain is necessary when we talk about ethical theme, an opening to or an encounter with the other. It will also consider the relation between her wound and the sense of liberation, which is perceived in her poetry. Finally, it will discuss how Anzaldúa describes the encounter with the unknown or the other through the depiction of her ruptured body in borderlands to explore what is radical about the delineation of her non-unitary existence.

**Keywords:** borderlands, wounds, disidentification, non-violence, the other

*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* was published in 1987 and is one of the most prominent pieces written by Gloria Anzaldúa. This text contains a miscellany of diverse languages (at least 8 different languages), styles (poetry, prose, fiction, and nonfiction), and perspectives of people who reside in borderlands between nations, races, genders, and sexualities. Before *Borderlands* was written, a feminist movement

experienced drastic changes throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1970s, for instance, Combahee River Collective, a black lesbian feminist organization in Boston, proposed the concept of “simultaneity,” which referred to impacts caused by race, gender, class, and sexuality simultaneously, and criticized the civil rights movement headed by black men and feminism led by white middle-class heterosexual women, claiming that they neglected the experiences of non-white non-heterosexual working-class women.

Anzaldúa actively participated in the socio-political movement at that time by getting involved in some feminist organizations in order to respond to the changing social and political circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Most notably, Anzaldúa with Cherrie Moraga edited *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), a feminist anthology that conveys a message that gender is not the only oppression and that the fact that women of color suffer from multiple oppressions should not be ignored. When it came out, it was quite an unexpected revelation for white middle-class heterosexual women. According to Kelly Coogan-Gehr, the book was shocking and even threatening to them because they had to confront totally different feelings experienced by disenfranchised non-white women and “an ongoing critique of the status quo and an exhaustive critique of feminist theory in its entirety” at that time (92).

Anzaldúa seems to have incorporated such experience into her literary creation of *Borderlands/La Frontera*. As Coogan-Gehr has argued, Anzaldúa’s concept of borderlands, as a notion of split ontology, offers a vastly different way to understand the spaces, that is, the historical concept within which individuals reside; Anzaldúa’s concept creates “an intangible and untraceable place [...] where they can return to be rejuvenated and find inspiration to encounter [...] the harshly political contents and realities of their lives” (128). Also, Patricia Hill Collins, one of the advocates of intersectionality, the concept devised in 1989 by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw based on studies conducted by non-white feminists, refers to Anzaldúa’s concept of borderlands. Collins states, “[T]he spacial understandings of the borderland [...] deepens understandings of intersecting power relations. Anzaldúa’s work links experiences, spatial metaphors, power, and political engagement” (33).

Since Anzaldúa’s metaphors supply “a holistic mental picture of interrelated phenomena as well as new insights into and angles of vision on social relations” (Collins 33), exploring her concepts and thoughts depicted in *Borderlands/La Frontera* is highly significant these days when we still face struggles for survival such as Black Lives Matter Movement, those who are subjected to the impacts of the pandemic disease<sup>2</sup> and wars and conflicts between nations, ethnic or religious groups. In response to the exploitation and the oppression suffered by minorities, Anzaldúa employs motives such as wounds and pain in a characteristic way in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She tries not only to depict her own wounds but also to cast her eyes on numerous wounds of other borderland people and to capture their pain with her literature to show us a hope to put a stop to the chain of violence. The purpose of this study is to consider the ethical moment depicted in her work. It especially focuses on the representation of wounds, both physical and psychological pains and sufferings, of people in borderlands because it seems that for Anzaldúa, describing those wounds is one of the means to counter violence and prompt the moment of ethical encounter with others. Anzaldúa earnestly keeps her eyes fixed on the reality of individuals in borderlands and minutely depicts their sufferings that most people want to avert their eyes from. I contend that she dares to direct her eyes toward the pain and wounds of people in borderlands even though they are too painful to look at, paying respect to those who

were tormented by emotional and physical trauma. By referring to such theorists as Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as well as other scholars who have considered Anzaldúa's thoughts, works, and literary expressions, I argue that her negative, grotesque, and visceral depiction of wounds and pain paradoxically represents an opening to an ethical encounter with the other, moments of hope not only to counter and confute oppressions based on stereotyped categories but also to reconnect oneself to cultural others without violence.

### **Recalling the People in Borderlands and Their Wounds That are Too Numerous to Count**

Firstly, this paper examines how the pain and wounds of people in borderlands are described in her text and how she responds to the sufferings of others to oppose and struggle against violence and atrocities as a poet and with her critical eye. Then, it will try to answer the question as to why she emphasizes these pains and wounds, rather grotesque, visceral subject matter, when talking about an ethical theme and what sort of ethical and aesthetic effects her depiction produces.

It seems that their pain and wound arise from their peculiar positionality. Anzaldúa says that the Texas-Mexican border is a "place of contradiction" and where "[h]atred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features" (Preface to the First Edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*). In "The Homeland, Aztlán/*El Otro México*," she is talking about the borderland between Mexico and the U.S. where "crossed ones" live (25). She conceives of the borderland as a wound fissured in her body (24). Her body is torn between different cultures, and its division causes intense pain. It is an open wound "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (25), and residents who are non-white are considered to be trespassers and "will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot" (25). They are always teetering on the edge of death. She tells us the history of violence, pillage, and exploitation by Anglo cultural, political, and economic supremacy on the US-Mexico border, mentioning brutality and disempowerment such as sexual violence and dispossession as examples of painful symptoms of the divide (28-35). She excavates the stories of disenfranchised people that are deleted from the official history. For instance, she tells the story of Chicano landowners, including her grandmother and Indians, cheated out of their land by Anglo land developers and colonizing corporations (30-31) and sweatshop workers exploited by the US conglomerates (32). She says, "The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority [...] stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land [...] we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed" and those who protested were lynched, shot, and killed (29-30). She also mentions illegal immigrants trying to cross the border. Some are caught, and some become the prey of smugglers or ranch owners. Mexican women are doubly threatened by exploitation and sexual violence (34).

However, not only Anglos but the people of her own culture inflict pain on her. Anzaldúa writes that she has rebellious blood overflowing in her veins and a defiant face ready to burst out against oppressions not only by dominant cultures but by her own culture and people that regard her as an outcast, a foreign body (37). According to Anzaldúa, cultures segregate people from the unknown such as animalistic impulses and deviants (39). She says that most cultures, including her own, show intolerance to sexual minorities and have burned and battered them (40). They are considered "sub-human, in-human, non-human" (40). If

they reveal themselves as queer, their homophobic family, culture, and race reject them (42). She suffers from “intimate terrorism” being estranged from her own culture and a stranger in the dominant society (42). Cultural tyranny petrifies, immobilizes, and cripples women (42-3). The wound of mestiza is deep and still bleeding from hundreds of years of slavery, exploitation, colonization, and patriarchy. They have been stifled, confined, and bruised for centuries (44). She also mentions her language. Chicanos have been suffering from linguistic terrorism since Spanish and Anglo colonization. They have been punished for and accused of speaking an incorrect, illicit language (80). Considering the examples quoted above, it is obvious that living in the borderland is a nightmare, a horrendous ordeal. Under a harsh political regime — racist, sexist, heterosexist, they suffer culturally, sexually, economically, and linguistically. Their wounds are deep and entangled, which make one petrified and hurt.

By referring to those countless wounds and pains, rather negative, grotesque, and visceral subject matter, it is possible to say that Anzaldúa tries to show or mirror crudeness, vulgarness, and lack of intellectual capacity of violence itself which intends to destroy and nullify precious others. She writes “Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent” (68), which does not mean that we should fight one evil with another, but rather it is assumed that it tells us that my wound is actually yours, it is the reflection of your wound, your precarity itself. To quote the comment of Judith Butler on the vulnerability of our lives, Butler points out that “interdependency [...] makes our life possible but that can also be one condition for exploitation and violence (*The Force* 591). We should not hurt or kill someone because “violence against the other is violence against oneself” (Butler *The Force* 353). It seems reasonable to suppose that from her bitter experience and what she has seen and heard in borderlands, Anzaldúa is painfully aware that our lives inevitably implicate one another. We must depend on each other. We cannot survive without others, which leads us to think of an important ethical theme, that is cohabitation with others in a non-violent way. Then, how does Anzaldúa face and deal with this difficult brutal situation? How does she encounter this unspeakably cruel situation with her literature? How does she try to respond to those countless entangled wounds as a poet?

One thing Anzaldúa is trying to do is to recall borderland people who have not been regarded as human beings under the racist, sexist, and heterosexist regime and effaced from the distorted and whitewashed history. Judith Butler writes about the production of human beings saying that “the human is a historically variable concept, differentially articulated in the context of inegalitarian forms of social and political power,” and it is made up by means of exclusions, and thus it is always “haunted by those figures that do not count” as humans (*The Force* 743). With the remark quoted above in mind, let us follow, for the moment, how Anzaldúa describes relationships of power between the production of human and inhuman, how she excavates and recalls stories of disenfranchised and excluded people who are regarded as non-human by the discriminatory regime. The following are some random examples.

She depicts, for instance, how Anglos exploit wetbacks. They work undocumented workers from morning till night like farm animals and deliver them to the police before giving payment to them (*Borderlands* 146-151). Another is that Anglo intruders who deceived Mexicans out of their small ranches, burned and lynched them, and raped and smothered women (156-7). She also depicts gay men suffering from homophobic violence (164, 167) and raises her voice in bitter lament for lost love or love she has

never been able to have under the heterosexist regime (168-9). Furthermore, she writes about her worn-out mother, who works steadily morning to night, day after day. She works 12 hours a day like a mule, being exploited by a field boss. Her hands grow gnarled, and her feet are swollen from heavy physical labor, so she wants to sever her hands and feet (138-141). Anzaldúa also writes about her grandmother whose hair “turned white overnight” at the age of sixteen (130). Unlike the title of the poem, “Immaculate, Inviolable,” her grandmother is wounded all over. Once she suffered hideous burns and her skin blistered badly and nerve endings were exposed. She was afflicted by nausea and dizziness and her body was swollen to “twice her size” (131). She has suffered mental and physical abuse from her husband for years (132).

However, the grandmother never forgets to mourn others who were also the victim of an unequal society that divides people into two categories; people who are “produced as a recognizable and valuable human” and who are not, people who are “included within the category of the human” and who are “fully excluded, who would not be grieved because they are effectively and socially dead” (Butler, *The Force* 737). Anzaldúa says that her grandmother “never stopped wearing *luto*,” mourning clothes for her husband, her brother, and her son who is Anzaldúa’s father and died at the age of 38 because of heavy labor in the field (*Borderlands* 112, 131). Anzaldúa’s grandmother never failed to grieve over the death of people who were not counted as humans and whose death were not worth grieving under the violent regime. By mourning those people, one can claim that she challenges sovereign power, treats them as “a recognizable and valuable human,” and tries to make their death worth grieving.

Here Anzaldúa depicts her grandmother as a woman who never lost her “dignity” and “pride” (132) no matter how hard her life was. What she tries to do by describing the hardships and pains of subjugated, marginalized people is something that can be called a vicarious act: lamenting their hardships, grieving over their deaths, and experiencing their pains vicariously like her grandmother. One of the things that are notable is that by depicting her grandmother and mourning her death, Anzaldúa encounters a figure of her grandmother in mourning clothes grieving over the deaths of other subjugated people, which shows that she respected and treated those people as humans, thus never lost her pride and dignity. According to Butler, “people can be grieved [...] only to the extent that loss can be acknowledged; and loss can be acknowledged only when the conditions of acknowledgment are established within a language” (*The Force* 1283). By acknowledging “*luto*” and depicting her grandmother who is mindful of the dead with her language, Anzaldúa refuses the reproduction of non-humans and challenges the violent regime. The figure of her grandmother in mourning with dignity creates an ethical, challenging sort of beauty.

Thus, from the observation given above, it can be said that Anzaldúa tries to respond to the pain of others by tenaciously and minutely depicting their hardships even though they cannot be fully expressed by the word. One thing I would like to point out is that when exerting herself to respond to the pain and the sufferings of others, she defies apathy toward the pain of others by minutely depicting specific figures and their wounds which would recall countless other sufferings of people in borderlands. Surprisingly, she spends well over half of the entire text mentioning the sufferings of people in borderlands, describing what violence does to us: it dismembers us, and it eviscerates us. One more thing I would like to add is that, although it may sound paradoxical, her rather tenacious and lengthy depiction of people’s pain emphasizes that the pain and hardships they suffer cannot be expressed completely and cannot be conveyed readily. It

can be said that the refusal of facile sympathy shows that she respects each individual and equally grieves over every single pain of theirs. Anzaldúa's gaze at the pain of others performs unremitting resistance against violence.<sup>3</sup>

## The Quest for Non-violent Relations with Wounded Self and with Others

When Anzaldúa depicts atrocities that are too many to enumerate inflicted in borderlands, she transcripts the harsh reality rather objectively, albeit the description is based on interpretation of the reality with her discernment, her testimony with a critical eye. On the contrary, when she describes her own wounds, it seems that her critique gets fierce and radical. Why does it happen? To search for the answer, this section will discuss, firstly, how she describes her own wound. It will especially focus on a representation of a wound or an aperture as an opening toward the other. Then, it will compare it with the similar representation in Émile Zola's work observed by Gilles Deleuze in order to explain how Anzaldúa tries to fathom ethical distance to the other to contemplate non-violence.

One way Anzaldúa seeks to discontinue the chain of violence is to unlearn the dichotomic way of thinking. She says that it is not sufficient to be on the other side "challenging patriarchal, white conventions" (*Borderlands* 100). She writes that the counter stance shuts a person into "a duel of oppressor and oppressed" and reduces them "to a common denominator of violence" (100). Unlearning this way of thinking is not easy. It is just "the beginning of a long struggle" (102). However, one needs to learn "tolerance for ambiguity" to bring a chain of violence and inner war to an end (101-2) because she knows that she has no nation, no ethnicity, no tradition as a non-heterosexual feminist hybrid and that she herself is a battlefield, which causes a deep psychological wound. How does she reach a new perception, a new consciousness that can be a continuous critique of violence?

The description of her wound seems to be the key factor. One of the crucial moments in *Borderlands* occurs when Anzaldúa perceives "the Shadow Beast" (38, 42) in her wounded self, which resists cultural enslavement and tries to refigure and reconstruct herself by her own "bricks and mortar" and "architecture," (44) which is her linguistic, figurative force.

For example, she depicts the process of transformation or disidentification through which she becomes a serpent that is a representation or manifestation of "the Shadow Beast." Anzaldúa says that she was once bitten by a serpent, and that same night, fangs came out in her mouth, and her body was covered with scales. Waking up from the dreadful nightmare, she realizes that inside her body flows serpent blood and that she sees things with her serpent eyes (48). This alternative blood and perspective enable her to perceive multiple realities and overcome dichotomic ways of thinking (59).

Anzaldúa then further depicts her protean beings: she changes into various beasts, and when a serpent visits her psyche, a rift opens in her body, and something unknown starts to intrude and attempts to alter it (63-4). She opens herself to "the alien other," "the other side unknown" (70), which is beyond control, and reiterates her reincarnations, writing:

A light [...] passes through my body and comes out of the other side. I collapse into myself – a delicious caving into myself imploding [...] Something pulsates in my body, a luminous thin thing

that grows thicker every day. Its presence never leaves me. I am never alone (73).

She perceives something unsung inside, which she calls “[t]hat which abides” (73). Her body becomes a terrain unknown to herself which makes her an exile or a nomad who crosses internal borders and abysses and who persistently rewrites herself.

In order to move towards a deeper understanding of the dynamism that is characteristic of borderlands which contain matter without boundaries, it is useful to refer to comments made by Gilles Deleuze regarding an aperture in Émile Zola's *La Bête Humaine* (1890). Deleuze quotes a passage which tells of an aperture inherited by the man and his family: the man suddenly loses his balance, and a fissure opens in his body from which flows his ego shrouded in fumes (321). Then Deleuze points out that there are two kinds of hereditary transmission: one is the heredity of instinct, and the other is the heredity of the fissure (324-5). The former transmits sameness or homogeneity, whereas, by contrast, the latter, the fissure, disseminates only fissures. The fissure does not reproduce similarity but is always in the state of deviation, changing its course and going in unexpected directions; it perpetually transmits otherness and transformation (324-5).

The point here is the diffusion of potentialities. According to Deleuze, the aperture indicates the death instinct (326). However, the aperture contains what surpasses itself, that is, the death instinct betrays itself and lays itself open to something other than death (332). Although the protagonist of the novel committed murder and was unable to halt the chain of violence, Deleuze sees the theme in the novel, which is the tragic destiny of a genetic defect and a beast in a human that commits murder, from a different perspective. He indicates that the aperture is a potentiality which disseminates differences, transformation, and otherness.<sup>4</sup>

The aperture which leads through otherness can also be observed in “*Un Agitado Vient*,” the latter part of *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The representation of aperture, however, is limned with different images and logic: an opening such as absence or void, a beast which pierces the skin and devours the viscera, and a body as a canvas in which words are carved. Anzaldúa repeatedly exposes herself to the openings, dives into them, and furthermore, she even bores an opening in her own body.

Take “Poets have strange eating habits” (162-3), for example. In this poem, a poet who crosses the borderland between human and non-human is perceived as one who repeatedly descends into an abyss or a chasm. During her descent, the poet turns into a fetus of an eagle and a serpent, is swallowed by a horse, and sprouts wings from her skin. She wriggles her body in a serpentine motion, slithering into crevices. In the end, she devours everything. She eulogizes cannibals and places emphasis on her heterogeneousness as a border crosser.

Another example is that in “Interface” (170-4), the encounter with, and the acceptance of, the other that contains the complicity of distance and perspective are described. The interface is a space where heterogeneity is encountered, and it is a domain which is open to what deviates from the “substantial” or the “physical,” a dense space where numerous different layers and segments are lying one above another. In this multilayered and diversified domain begins an unusual symbiotic relationship with a stranger.

In “Letting go” (186-8), the poet depicts the liberation of heterogeneity by means of an opening that is pierced through her body; she says that what overflows from the opening are various animals and plants, and the hum of their voices. After that, an imaginary animal, a dragon, swallows her and her body dissolves,

which liberates her from herself. She writes:

You've crossed over.  
And all around you space.  
Alone. With nothingness [...]  
And all around you a vast terrain [...]  
you come to the open (187-8).

At this moment, she is set free in an aperture, a borderland which opens itself to the unknown or otherness; her ruptured body reveals the unstableness or inconsistency of a bodily domain in which cultural, political, and ruling conventions, or categories such as race, gender sexuality, ethnicity, class or nationality, work as a dominant power, and it also exposes potentialities of unexpected representation of bodies. The opening is linked to one of the numerous possibilities, which drives her to another crossing, another encounter with otherness. Her opening touches the abyss, which starts the difficult journey, to connect our future to multifarious possibilities and various signs of existence. Indeed, this rupture or void inscribed in her text is the very site of critique which makes it possible to disturb and render insecure the boundaries between conventional and unconventional beings, and which facilitates rearticulation of orthodoxly materialized selves.

In "*Companera, cuando amabamos*" (168-9), a poet addresses her loved one who is absent, recollecting quiet afternoons in which they exchanged their affections toward each other. She addresses a question to her absent lover, asking her whether those days would return; the poet knows, however, that she is not lonesome because her lover dwells in the words she inscribes, and even in her dreams. Now, they are strangers to each other. There lies an abyss between them. They stand at the edge of the abyss and dive into the depth toward the loved one, the other. At that moment, they expose themselves to borderland as crossers; they expose themselves to a crisis in the entangled maze where an innocent body search for an obscure figure of the other. In this daydream-like aperture, the remoteness and the closeness are strangely intricately. That is, there is a strange interconnection between senses of closeness and remoteness: the unfathomable distance between her and the absent other is entangled with the unexpected adjacency of that same other as she fills the poet's words and dreams. For Anzaldúa, to love is to cross the unfathomed abyss and at the same time to reveal the impossibility of the crossing, that is, to accept the complexity of the distance to the other.<sup>5</sup>

What do Anzaldúa's poetic imagery, all these metamorphoses, openings, abyss, or vast distance between the self and the other indicate? Take, as an example, the last piece mentioned above. Who is this lost object whom she calls a stranger? If this piece is a lament for a lost love she had or she has never been able to have under a certain regime, it could be read as a struggle or defiance against violence which turns both inwards and outwards. How so? There are, of course, several ways to interpret her imagery, but I think that one of Freud's psychoanalytic concepts, called "mania," seems to be useful when we think about a lost person or object that cannot be fully comprehended or identified. It is one of the two types of melancholia which is derived from the death drive. The other one is self-criticism, having a tendency toward self-destruction such as condemning and attacking oneself, which can also be turned externally. Mania tries to sever the connections with the lost object, actively condemning the object that is gone so



that it can be said that mania is one of the methods to avoid resorting to violence toward the self and the other.<sup>6</sup> According to Judith Butler, one of the critical functions of mania is “disidentification,” a different kind of resistance to destruction, which tries to get out of the vicious circle and refuses to accept the status quo, seeking to dismantle violent regimes (*The Force* 2014-37). In the first half of her poem, Anzaldúa recollects the time she spent with her lost loved one rather concretely. However, there subsequently appears a vast distance between the two who are now strangers to each other. At this moment, it could be said that she performs “disidentification,” actively disidentifying herself from the loss she had or has never had under an oppressive regime in the hope of ending an abusive, destructive relationship with the other and the self as well as breaking the status quo which reproduces the subjugated, the melancholic, or the wounded. Breaking the bond to the loss means positively forgetting the loss itself and transforming it into something unknown and potential that could be a continuous critique of tyranny. In a similar way, it is conceivable that with her peculiar poetic imagery Anzaldúa performs metamorphosis to subvert her stereotyped, subjugated self, writhing in pain, ripping out entrails, and turning herself inside out. The abyss or void excavated in her text indicates something unknown and potential for the better, which seeks to reconnect oneself to the world ethically and non-violently. The oscillation of distance to the other is assumably the ethical distance that eschews devastating actions directed against both the other and the self, which also testifies to the interrelatedness of one’s own wound and other people’s wounds as mentioned in the first section.

### **Ruptured Self and A Language that Speaks of What is Other**

It was observed in the preceding sections that Anzaldúa attempted to deter violence by casting her eyes on the sufferings of people in the borderlands, and the representation of an aperture is an opening toward the other which is derived from her disidentification, her quest for the ethical distance or relation to otherness.

Let us now consider the relation between the representation of void and the sense of liberation, which is perceived in her poetry, and focus on her description of disidentification depicted in her work rather than focusing on her identity-based positions,<sup>7</sup> and the description of a wound, or an opening fissured in her body which is opened and exposed to the world and the other to ponder over its ethical meaning. It will discuss her poetry because the crucial moment in which Anzaldúa encounters the other through disidentification which is delineated as an opening fissured in herself is perceived in her poems.<sup>8</sup> I believe that her rearticulation of herself is an effective method not only to counter and confute oppressions based on stereotyped categories but reconnect oneself to the world in a non-violent way and envision a better future.

Referring to Anzaldúa, Judith Butler writes that to query the subject is to put at risk what is already known, that is, that there exist, beneath the surface of what we think we already know, latent possibilities that are yet unknown and unexplored (*Undoing Gender* 27). According to Butler, Anzaldúa is “no unitary subject” (227), and this is characterized by her capacity to cross borders between different cultural and linguistic spheres (227-8), which enables constant encounters and negotiations with others that are heterogeneous and extraneous. Butler says that Anzaldúa insists that we should cast doubt on our “epistemological certainties” (228) and explore beyond the limits of the known world to broaden our capability “to imagine the human [...] in the encounter with the other” (228) pointing out more radical

feature of Anzaldúa's state of existence. From these remarks, it is clear that her no unitary subject contains otherness in itself. Thus, it is helpful to further explore how Anzaldúa depicts non-unitary subjectivity or borderland states of existence represented by ruptured self in the text and ponder over its ethical relations with the other.

Anzaldúa states that to create her text is to put her body in borderlands where "nothing" is "defined or definite" and which are "a boundless, a floating state of limbo" (94). Her creative power and her corporeality are deeply connected; she says that our psyche or inner being can be altered or reconstructed only through our physicality, and suggests that visions, expressions, and narratives which have creative and reconstructive strength should emerge from our corporeality (97). She also says that the body is a locus in which fictions, imaginations, remarks, and the real world intersect ("Editor's Introduction" in *Light* 212) and that her responsibility is to offer readers the opportunity of co-creation so that they can alter and rewrite the sovereign narrative (*Light* 7), which, I insist, shows her non-essentialist view of subjugated self.

According to Butler, imagination should be understood "as an activity of [...] dispersion of the subject into a variety of identificatory positions" ("Introduction" 267n7). Anzaldúa's critical imagery promotes the dissemination of the subject into dynamic ever-constructing existential positions, which reveals the discursiveness of bodies and enables them to rewrite themselves. She tenaciously and painstakingly estranges or alienates herself and transforms into imaginary figures by using the power of discourse to undermine, unseat and rearticulate realities. In the same way, Gayle Salamon states that to survive the social or political situation in which one's own personification or incarnation is regarded as detestable and unlivable is "to undertake a constant and always incomplete labor to reconfigure more than just the materiality of our bodies. It is to strive to create and transform the lived meanings of those materialities" (121).

However, it is no easy task. Anzaldúa says that we need to undergo "a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (*Borderlands* 100) to change "the way we perceive reality" (102) and to unlearn and overcome "dualistic thinking" (102) that could hopefully terminate sexual assault, brutality, and conflicts (102). She also asserts that "[t]o survive the Borderlands / you must live *sin fronteras* / be a crossroads" (217). For Anzaldúa, to unlearn subject-object duality is to transform the "I" into a dynamic space that has enormous potentialities to change the norm and produce something unpredictable or another articulation and that makes one a passage to the most distant place where one can encounter the unknown or the other. As mentioned earlier, the "interface" is the domain which embraces what deviates from physicality or materiality. It must be questioned, however, as to what is meant by Anzaldúa's decision to both tenaciously depict her sense of physicality, whilst at the same time also deviating from her materiality. Relevant to this point are some scholars' remarks on Anzaldúa as follows.

Referring to Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the "quantum" body, for example, Amala Levine says that for Anzaldúa, "the appearance of reality is always a projection of our particular cognitive state [...] from a spiritualized perspective matter dissolves into a flux of possibilities co-existing in a web of potential interrelationships" which provides limitless probabilities of bodily formation (175) and supports her non-essentialist view of subjugated self. Referring to Anzaldúa's "fluid ontology," AnaLouise Keating points out that "[i]n her ontology, language does not simply refer to or represent reality" and "words and images

matter and *are* matter; they can have causal, material(izing) force [...] the potential to *shift* reality” and act on and modify “biological bodies” (“Editor’s Introduction” in *Light* 554, 560, 609), which, I believe, also suggests her non-essentialist view in which she perceives corporeality as inscribable and rewritable, and her struggle to transform status quo which reproduces subjugated self with her imagery. In another poem, Anzaldúa depicts the moment at which her body goes beyond dichotomy and becomes the locus where she encounters otherness. She writes

You entered me through all the cracks  
with your light you filled the hole in my body [...]  
You sowed your seeds of light in the grooves of my body [...]  
I make and undo -what an endless task you left me [...]  
I am no longer the owner [...]  
I want to sprout again on your [...] skin. (*Borderlands* 210-11 translation mine)

Here, alterity, or something foreign interrupts her and is being articulated within herself and dislocates her, which solicits interlocution with the other. Anzaldúa writes that “*you’re not contained by your skin you exist outside your body [...] it doesn’t have boundaries [...] the body must be more than the categories that mark you*” (*Light* 134). She further writes that “[n]othing is fixed. The pulse of existence is fluid. Identity, like a river, is always changing, always in transition [...] You begin to define yourself in terms of who you are becoming, not who you have been” (*Light* 135). It is no exaggeration to say that Anzaldúa promotes becoming by being interrupted by the otherness and transforming herself into numerous figures and creatures. Within herself, she finds an ever-growing novel exterior.

In a similar way, Butler says that by virtue of being in the state of “becoming” and “always living with the constitutive possibility of becoming otherwise,” our corporeality can capture “the norm” in numerable ways, and as a result, it can surpass, rewrite, and revise the regulatory power (*Undoing* 217). Consequently, Butler argues, “realities” are exposed as variable, “open to transformation” (217). Anzaldúa writes:

I’m quiet, I’m nothing [...]  
Stirring and repeating nonsense words. I feel something bursting in an internal place [...]  
a rough wind pushes me. I feel very far away [...]  
I stir and repeat nonsense words. Someone complains in an internal place [...]  
In an internal place something bursts and rough wind blows the pieces away (*Borderlands* 158-160 translation mine).

Here, it is observed that something erupts inside her body, and she hears a language refusing to make sense. Cracks open in her corporeality which carries linguistic plasticity and something unknown and mysterious or otherness, bursts inside; then the wind blows, and the pieces are dispersed throughout the text. I think what the dispersion of the “algo” (something) indicates is that the “algo” itself is the dynamism of borderlands and the “algo” always remains radical alterity, complete otherness that cannot be reached and remains inscrutable or unpredictable, which raises the issue of the ethical dimension of the void opened in her body and text. The wind frequently blows in her text; it is also this wind that is blowing across the borderland between Mexico and the US, just as if there is no border. Anzaldúa says that “algo” is pieces

of words without meaning. Strong wind blows them away and “algo” scatters over the text. This dynamic process of going beyond meanings is certainly an attempt to overcome the concept of “border crossing” and bring the conception itself to a crisis, and this is also the very process of accepting the ethical encounter with the other. What we must do is accept and embrace those pieces of “algo,” which contain something unknown and unfathomable, that is, “a language that speaks of what is other” (*Lights* 101),<sup>9</sup> dispersed in the text.

To further discuss the relation between non-violent and ethical dimensions of the void and the other, it is important to consider how Anzaldúa tries to deter the act of violence and to reconnect ethically with others through the wound, the ruptured body. According to Butler, “[i]f violence is the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then non-violence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to mastery that our obligations to others require” (*Giving* 64). How does Anzaldúa challenge sovereignty to perform her responsibility toward others?

Her body is a site of ongoing violence which Anzaldúa describes as a battlefield (*Borderlands* 216) where she exposes herself to wounds and strives to disturb the violent act by altering her object, non-normative bodies or subjectivities into a dynamic, ever-constructing existential position. This is where she encounters the void which is a highly ethical lacuna opened by the practice of non-violence. The following remarks will be helpful for our discussion.

Quoting Butler's comments on violence, Fiona Jenkins says that “those who are ‘unreal’ lack the boundaries protected by a normative constitution [...] This is at once the Levinasian inviolable face that one seeks to kill but cannot kill; the “inviolable” of that which lies outside the terms of social recognition as a legal subject.” Jenkins further writes that “an irreducible vulnerability [...] that escapes representation in the hegemonic order [...] should be made to appear as the perverse testimony of violence” (167-8). It seems reasonable to suppose that the aperture or void that Anzaldúa describes is quite akin to this “inviolable face,” which eludes figuration. As stated by Butler, “the face [...] will be that for which no words really work; the face seems to be the kind of sound, the sound of language evacuating its sense, the sonorous substratum of vocalization that precedes and limits the delivery of semantic sense” (*Precarious* 134). In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa stubbornly and painstakingly tries to subvert the constitutive force by altering object selves into various creatures until she hears something inside her body explode and be pierced into pieces, and she encounters the void in herself, as seen previously. It seems reasonable to say that one thing the void shows is the violence which negates the existence of certain people as the inviable. At the same time, it precisely shows her subversive resistance to being violently captured or possessed by the frame of representation enforced by the sovereign power, making it the space for rearticulation of oneself. The void which is opened in her body and in her text is “a rupture in being” (Jenkins 175), the site of humanity where we encounter the inviolable face, the Other. As we have seen, when “algo” bursts into pieces inside her body, she hears something inside murmur nonsense or words without meaning. And soon after the explosion of “algo,” the wind starts to blow and carry away those nonsensical utterances, which exposes the limit of semantic sense, which is a ripple of stuttering, murmuring, or undifferentiated sound, the sound of figurative force or creation struggling to rearticulate a monolithic sociopolitical reality for the better.<sup>10</sup> It is fair to say that it is the very ethical moment at which one encounters alterity, and which facilitates rewriting and rearticulating

of stereotyped, ostracized selves and violent status quo. Keating points out that Anzaldúa had a “desire to go beyond description and representation by using words” and to reach “through the wounds [...] to connect with others” (“Editor’s Introduction” in *Light* 364, 370, 379). It is noteworthy that this is a very moment at which, while she is being undone, she encounters the other that is something that cannot be fully articulated and that will perpetually make one unfathomable to oneself and diversify the manifestations of life.<sup>11</sup>

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes that in the encounter with the other, what needs to be done is “not to transcode but draw response” from the other, which is “the irreducible work of translation, not from language to language but from body to ethical semiosis” (13). Spivak also writes that “[o]ur own undecidable meaning is in the irreducible figure that stands in the eyes of the other” (23) emphasizing the danger of generalization and reductive definition of the other, which leads to the destruction of precious otherness of the other. What we must do is not to speak for the other, but rather to learn to (un)learn from the other. The same may be said of Anzaldúa because she highlights the constant relocations of the “I” by turning into other creatures in borderlands and radicalizes the dislocation of the “I” by exposing the void or rupture in her being until she encounters alterity which she delineates as the ethical moment. At that moment, she is being undone and her figure is being blurred with luminous lights overflowing from her body and she perceives something explode inside and hears something enigmatic inside mutter words being deprived of its sense, which shows the limits of articulation or fracture of representation in the face of the other.

Throughout her text, Anzaldúa tries to transform the suffering of others and her own to its extremity, which eventually appears as the ruptured body and the void bored in it. The shattered self with the void shows not only the pain suffered by people in borderlands but a fearsome deed of perpetration and inhumanity. It also manifests resistance to be reproduced and reused as the subjugated body to revoke violence in the hope, I insist, that it would arise time and again from fragments of algo that speaks of what is other, shedding pure light with sheer liberty and with no boundaries. Thus, the aperture or wound fissured in her body is the very site where this precious moment arrives, and this moment will be continued every time this moment is perused, rewritten, and cocreated, which leads to perpetual interlocution with the yet unknown that should be referred to as none other than life itself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further details, see “Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa by Karin Ikas” in *Borderlands* (227-246).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Butler, Judith. “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter’?” *New York Times*, 12 January 2015 and “How to Save Black and Hispanic Lives in a Pandemic.” *New York Times*, 11, April 2020.

<sup>3</sup> As to the pain of others communicated through the media, see *Regarding the Pain of Others* by Susan Sontag.

<sup>4</sup> Anzaldúa refers to one of the concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the rhizome. See *Light in the Dark* p.68.

<sup>5</sup> The complication of farness and nearness is also perceived in one of Anzaldúa’s poems titled

“Nightvoice.”

<sup>6</sup> As to mania, see *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* by Sigmund Freud.

<sup>7</sup> AnaLouise Keating points out that previous studies of Anzaldúa's works and theories have focused too much on her “identity-based” interference, which needlessly restrict our comprehension of her creation (“Shifting Worlds” 2). Leela Fernandes agrees with Keating, saying that “the depth of Anzaldúa's critical vision has often been lost in this identity-based deployment” (41).

<sup>8</sup> Linda Garber comments on her poetry, stating that it is necessary to pay more attention to Anzaldúa's poetry, otherwise we fail to catch crucial features of her attempt and concept. Moreover, she points out that “some of Anzaldúa's themes [...] are fully visible in the poetry” (214).

<sup>9</sup> Keating points out that Anzaldúa had a “desire to go beyond description and representation by using words” and to reach “through the wounds [...] to connect with others” (“Editor's Introduction” in *Light* 364, 370, 379). Also, describing her writing process, Anzaldúa writes: “Dreaming awake, you go deep, listen, and watch; you attend to the imaginal with the goal of translating it on paper [...] Rivulets of water sluice around you, swirling [...] now you're flowing [...] It shares with you a language that speaks of what is other” (*Lights* 98-101). She further writes: “Shifting and fluid, the boundaries of self-identity blur” and she says this process occurs in “the body [...] writing is nothing if not a bodily act,” pointing out the significant connection between the body and creative process (*Light* 105). For Anzaldúa, the somatic is a site of creation and a space where she encounters the alterity.

<sup>10</sup> Referring to ontological decolonization, Anzaldúa writes: “My work is about questioning, affecting, and changing the paradigms that govern prevailing notions of reality [...] Writing is the site where I critique reality [...] dominant culture's representation and ideological control.” She further writes: “I am the one who writes and who is being written [...] It is the writing that “writes” me. I “read” and “speak” myself into being” (*Light* 10-11).

<sup>11</sup> Eve Wiederhold writes on Anzaldúa's concept “nepantla” or in-between space that it “opens a space [...] to listen for the not yet said, the not yet imagined” and it gives “a complex refusal to represent herself and her writing as recognizable” (“What Do You Learn” 117). She further writes that in this space, we “are positioned as foreigners occupying distinct discursive space” and “the work of translation is ever-present” (117). Since writing is “perpetual shapeshifting” for Anzaldúa, “it is here that we open ourselves to the energy of creativity while facing the abyss of the unknown” (120). Thus, in this discursive space, we encounter and deal with this chasm or void, that is, “her refusal to represent herself and her writing as recognizable” and it is an everlasting process.

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