Spiritual Activism… an inevitable unfolding

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> Caught between the sudden contraction, the breath sucked in and the endless space, the brown woman stands still, looks at the sky. She decides to go down, digging her way along the roots of trees. Sifting through the bones, she shakes them to see if there is any marrow in them. Then, touching the dirt to her forehead, to her tongue, she takes few bones, leaves the rest in their burial place. She goes through her backpack, keeps her journal and address book, throws away the muni-bart metromaps. The coins are heavy and they go next, then the greenbacks flutter through the air. She keeps her knife, can opener and eyebrow pencil. She puts bones, pieces of bark, hierbas, eagle feather, snakeskin, tape recorder, the rattle and drum in her pack and she sets out to become the complete *tolteca.*
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> Gloria Anzaldúa

Upon reading Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* during my junior year in college I immediately responded to her mapping of a "border consciousness" for its ability to provide me with a way to express the deep disconnection I felt as a daughter, not of the Cuban middle class, but of the seldom acknowledged racially-mixed Cuban working poor that had immigrated to the U.S. in the 1980s to the open disdain of more established Cubans and non-Cubans alike. Although I hailed from a different generation and cultural background, Anzaldúa's writing proved to be a source of inspiration and guidance through graduate school and then while teaching my own undergraduate classes where I found time and time again the usefulness of her work in getting at the heart of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other prejudices which run just as rampant in the classroom as they do in most of our daily interactions. Just as it had during my undergraduate classes, Anzaldúa's pieces produced for some students a sense of either great admiration or great discomfort; yet both emotions facilitated grappling with the internalized prejudices students carried with them into the classroom. In my role as an educator, this discomfort was one of the more interesting responses to witness as right before my eyes, across decades and geographical locations, Anzaldúa's work challenged the socially mobile aspirations of students who would prefer not to encounter the confusion invoked by her multiple languages and anti-colonial, feminist position. Yet for others, Anzaldúa's challenge to racism, classism, and colonial languages permitted deep belly sighs of relief at the recognition that it was not they who were somehow deficient, but instead that within their broken, mal hablado languages, within their otherwise "abnormal" bodies, sat a powerful truth: the inability to "dominate" any colonial language, is to enter a space where most of humanity resides, and a

space that is in between worlds.

Having celebrated over a decade of re-reading Anzaldúa's work, most recently I have turned to her writing for the sort of insights necessary when feeling perplexed by the global violence that has redefined how most of the world lives, travels, works, and interacts; the overwhelming need to access an approach capable of envisioning a shift in consciousness, a way of moving toward meaningful social change, and toward peace at this particular historical moment, has provoked a different (re)reading of Anzaldúa's work. I have discovered that Anzaldúa's recommendations for bringing about meaningful social change go well beyond the usual "call to action" which requires a clearly defined enemy. Instead Anzaldúa tells us that what is required is a "massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and the collective consciousness" (*Borderlands* 100), and this "uprooting" begins with the recognition that "it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank shouting questions at one another, locked in a dual of oppressor and oppressed, like the cop and the criminal, which are both ultimately reduced to a common denominator of violence" (100-101). Instead, "on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once see through serpent and eagle eyes… decide to disengage from the dominant culture and cross into a wholly new and separate territory. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react" (101).

This "way to a new consciousness" is a different proposition for those interested in ending abuses of power, as it provides a viable alternative to that of many postmodern thinkers who have stopped short at interrogating the dualistic thinking at the root of existing power structures (man/women, black/white, identity/difference, stance/counterstance) without connecting this interrogation to alternative forms of transformation. Anzaldúa proposes an uprooting of dualistic thinking that goes well beyond the interrogation of discourse. Anzaldúa's release from the conundrum of standing on one side, or the other, of the paired opposites (or of merely being able to recognize that such positioning is "the problem") is to insist that "we will have to leave the opposite bank," leave the spaces that may feel "safe," as doing so will end a life filled with "preemptive strikes," followed by endless violence. Anzaldúa goes on to state that in order to heal the split between these two mortal combatants we must disengage from our personal and collective stance/counterstance, move beyond "our story," beyond the social identities that feed a sense of belonging to "our" race, nationality, class, ethnicity, sexuality, caste, and gender group as well as religious or political affiliations, to which we desperately cling to while shouting at one another from the opposite side of the river bank, the table, an issue, or a border. Although such shouting matches feel important, as if they are a matter of life or death—inescapable, as an addiction feels inescapable—moving away from imagining ourselves, and others, as either heroes or villains results in a more honest assessment of just

exactly on whose back we are gaining our fictitious sense of "self." Anzaldúa's call for disidentification necessitates facing up to the real effects such identities produce, both the personal privileges one may gain from them, alongside the tragic limitations these categories create. To disidentify from either side is to question the privileges we take for granted, and the power which is carelessly given away in order to stand on one side or the other.

As part of a community split politically (one part on the island of Cuba and the other dispersed throughout the United States), I know firsthand the vicious power of the self-righteous indignation that has split families, violently pit a people against themselves, kept the majority of a population—whether "here" or "there"—in states of economic and psychic destitution that are seldom acknowledged. Yet more than this, standing on either shore has defined "being Cuban" as reacting to the latest posturing of one side or the other.

However, this disidentification from social identity categories is but a way station to a deeper transformative politics that synthesizes social activism with spiritual vision, thereby creating a unique form of "spiritual activism" (Anzaldúa 2001; Keating 2001; 2005). Spiritual activism—unlike either the hurried and frantic pace conventional religion or forms of activism produces—has its source within the individual and "emerges when we listen to the 'small still voice' (Teish) within us which can empower us to create actual change in the world" ("La Prieta," 195). It requires a slowing down in order to permit an expansive awareness "that finds the best instead of the worst in the other" (Anzaldúa "now let us shift," 572). Those who enact spiritual activism simultaneously engage in a movement for complete social, economic, and political justice as well as a profound spiritual journey toward a consciousness that will bring about an end to wars fought internally and externally. Much like the process of disidentification, spiritual activism is neither escapism nor an easy universalism which says "identity doesn't matter," in order to avoid confronting privilege (Fernandes 2003). Nor are these "new" concepts, or a celebration of a directionless form that denies the very real material effects of the identities which structure our lives, and it is more than simply an exercise in imagining a different, better, stronger kind of self. This experience, one in which one is on both sides of the process, is "a two way path—a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of the world we inhabit" (Anzaldúa, "La Prieta" 232). As such, it challenges the very root of our ego-driven identifications which shape our aspirations for recognition, success, and superiority (Fernandes) and begins meeting the immense need to be in relation. This process compels the individual committed to social justice to question who truly are "my/our enemies" or "the population 'I/we' wish to help." These questions in turn challenge our engagement with those on either side of the table, issue, or border because it dares to boldly acknowledge that our need to stay on either side, our desire to be 'safe' within identity categories, is in fact killing us (Souza 1996, 2006; 2006).

This process is crucial particularly because of the fact that it is harder than ever before to move away from dualistic thinking in the midst of a post 9/11 existence where the reality of protecting personal and geographic borders bombards us alongside a crisis in national and international immigration. In these times of individual and collective panic, those committed to social change must slowly, but surely, access a mode of perception capable of bringing forth peace.

spiritual mestizaje . . . an inevitable unfolding . . .

> We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward… the opus, the great alchemical work; spiritual mestizaje, a "morphogenesis, an inevitable unfolding.
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> (Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*103)

Anzaldúa's work tells us that resistance to identity boxes leads to a different tribe, a different story enabling "a rethinking of oneself in more global-spiritual terms instead of conventional categories of color, class, career," and furthermore changes the ways in which we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave (103). The spiritual activist's role is to extend herself—in small ways, and in big flamboyant and even obnoxious ways—toward ending the internal conflict which is mirrored in the external turmoil of the two sides, and to do so with the understanding that it is not only the "right" thing to do, but the only thing to do. Social change requires that we love, care for, and wish well upon those occupying what we would find to be an otherwise deplorable position. Applied to immigrant rights, for example, this includes loving those who risk their lives to enter U.S. boundaries, as well as those who create painful borders in the name of securing their own sense of safety. To love both with the understanding that they are one in the same, as both face the failure of national economies, the exorbitant cost of basic healthcare, the reduction of labor options, and a sense that in order to secure personal safety one has to either flee from home or push people out of a home which is also their birthright to inhabit.

For the activist and scholar looking to Anzaldúa's work for encouragement, the recommendation she offers is simple but nonetheless challenging. The "answer" is that "change requires more than words on a page—it takes perseverance, creative ingenuity, and acts of love" (1999, 575). We must focus less on our respective counterstance (including our respective disciplines, or "the field"), and instead talk and listen to one another with connection as our agenda; daring to ask at all times, *how would the world we inhabit be better if our work centered a consciousness that would allow "problematic populations" to*

survive the abandonment of (his)tory; what would our life's work look like if we were to tap into the consciousness that bestows upon us the right to live and work toward possibility? What if instead of creating heroes and victims within the global violence we all witness, as an alternative, we saw a people divided against themselves needlessly shouting across a divide and were moved toward teaching, working, writing, and loving guided by the conviction to end the suffering by reducing our contribution to the chaos. For me, such an approach means that it is not enough to stand self-righteously on either side of the Cuban political divide, nor can I ignore it; the only thing to do is act with the understanding that we, on all sides, are hurting, but we, on all sides, also hold in our hands the ability to forgive. This is what I bring to the table when sitting across the table, either in Miami or Havana, from people I love very much, and with whom I have disagreed very much. As we make our way towards peace, the fact that we are living in a place/time of Nepantla—"exiting from the old world view…not yet entered or created a new one" (Keating 529)—indicates that the space between violence and peace, counterstance and disidentification, discomfort and deep belly sighs, "the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where one struggles to find equilibrium" (Anzaldúa, 2001), is itself a site of transformation. The prayer and the intellectual hypothesis, which are one and the same, is that by operating from the belief that this population can heal, and must heal, we can indeed end these wars.

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