

THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF *MESTIZAJE*:  
Hybrid Christianity in the Texas-Mexico Borderland

A THESIS

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By

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## Abstract

*Mestizaje* refers to the mixture of Spanish colonizers and the indigenous peoples of Mexico and to the hybrid culture that has developed in the borderlands during the five centuries since the conquest. This paper explores the insights and limitations of a leading Chicana feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa, who seeks to create a new political consciousness for the *mestizo* (mixed) people. Anzaldúa's cultural and historical context led her to reject the various forms of oppression that she found in the Chicano community, including all forms of institutionalized religion (especially Catholicism). In this essay I will examine how Anzaldúa's rejection of Catholicism made her unable to see the resistance of the Chicana/o people to seemingly oppressive religious and societal structures. Drawing on Saba Mahmood, an Islamic feminist theorist, I argue that Chicana/o resistance may be expressed in ways that are different from the overt forms of resistance and defiance that are found in other societies. Two of Anzaldúa's contemporaries, Marta Cotera and Virgilio Elizondo, were able to work within the confines of Catholicism and to find a spiritual and political home in the hybrid Catholic church of Texas. Based on my experience witnessing life in the borderlands, I propose a reconceptualization of *mestizaje* that addresses both its politics and its poetics.

## **Introduction**

The term *mestizaje* is derived from the word *mestizo* (mixed). In the U.S. west and southwest, it refers to the *mestizaje* that took place between Spanish colonizers and the indigenous peoples of Mexico. As the term *mestizaje* suggests, a hybrid culture and religion developed as a result of this mixture between two different cultures. *Mestizaje* was the response of the indigenous peoples to having the Spanish conquistadors' religion and culture forced upon them as they were colonized. Despite sustained efforts, however, the Spanish could not fully eradicate the religious and cultural traditions of the people they had conquered.

Among the most important and enduring forms of *mestizaje* is the hybrid form of Catholicism that took root in the Texas borderlands that were once part of Mexico, and the hybrid culture that is characteristic of the borderlands in general. Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) was a pioneering Chicana feminist who grew up in the Texas borderlands and wrote about the “tolerance of ambiguities” that Mexican-Americans live within. Anzaldúa played a central role in the Chicana/o movement, seeking to create what she called “a new mestiza consciousness.” Her writings helped to shape the theory and practice of social justice that the succeeding generation of Chicana/os has adopted. Twelve years after her death, Anzaldúa continues to inspire scholars, artists and activists in the Chicana/o community and beyond.

As a radical Chicana feminist, Anzaldúa sought to empower the Chicana/o community. For Anzaldúa, Chicana/o agency means taking a stand against the oppressive patriarchal and hierarchical structures of both Chicano culture and the dominant Anglo culture of which it is a part. In this essay I argue that in her demand for change and her

rejection of patriarchy and religion, Anzaldúa underestimates the extent to which the Chicana/os had already succeeded in empowering themselves at the time that she was writing. Put differently, Anzaldúa fails to see the various forms of Chicana/o resistance to oppression that were all around her.

My argument is inspired in part by studies of Muslim women by Saba Mahmood, a feminist anthropologist. Mahmood points to various expressions of feminine agency that may be found within seemingly oppressive Islamic institutions. Similar examples of resistance may be found in the Chicana/o community. Anzaldúa's political rhetoric and her rejection of religion blind her to the joy and hope that hybrid forms of Catholicism in the borderlands have produced. This is a joy that Marta Cotera, Virgilio Elizondo and David Carrasco have expressed poignantly in their writings. Religion—specifically the mestizo Catholicism of the southwest U.S.—far from being a tool of oppression, has helped the *mestizo* community not only to survive but also to thrive in the borderlands that the Chicana/o community calls home.

I witnessed this community first-hand during a class trip to Rio Grande, where the Chicanos did not simply “tolerate” ambiguities and dualities but seemed to warmly embrace both. Anzaldúa helped to create an immensely powerful political consciousness. Cotera, Elizondo and Carrasco, in turn, have underscored the importance of religion in the borderlands. Drawing on the writings of Latino theorists of religion and on the ethnographic observations that I made during my visit to Texas, I propose a reconceptualization of *mestizaje*; one that addresses both its politics and poetics.

## **Anzaldúa's Contributions and Influence**

Gloria Anzaldúa was a courageous feminist. In *Borderlands: La Frontera, The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa expresses her rage about the injustices to which the Mexican-Americans on the border have been subjected. Since its publication in 1987, *Borderlands* has become a classic in Chicana and borderlands studies. As Sonia Salvidar-Hull notes in her introduction to the second edition of the book, Anzaldúa “opens up a radical way of restructuring the way we study history.”<sup>1</sup> Anzaldúa argues that from the late-nineteenth century to the 1960s, “the process of absorption into the U.S. included the imposition of White Supremacy aided by overt terrorist tactics of the Texas Rangers.”<sup>2</sup> Anzaldúa repudiates the standard narrative of United States history, with its emphasis on freedom and equality. She seeks to forge a new *mestiza* consciousness that rejects both traditional history and traditional religion, focusing instead on the empowerment of Chicanas.

The writings of Anzaldúa and other Chicana/o writers must be diffused as widely as possible in order to promote a sense of pride in young Mexican-Americans and to deepen their knowledge of the history of their marginalized people, who have always called the United States home. Moreover, the study of Chicana/o history and culture is important not only for Mexican-American youth but also for the larger community, “particularly in regards to improving racial attitudes, cross group interactions, and appreciation of diversity which is essential for an adequate 21<sup>st</sup> century multiracial and multiethnic democracy.”<sup>3</sup> The empirical evidence pointing to the benefits of Mexican-American

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands- La Frontera The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2007) 2.

<sup>2</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Valenzuela, Angela. *Expert Report of Dr. Angela Valenzuela, Ph.D.* (Austin:Np. 2016), 24.

studies in schools is irrefutable. At Colorado College, I have studied Anzaldua's *Borderlands* in both of the Chicana/o studies classes that I have taken ("Chicana/o Literature" and "Borders and Borderlands"). Both professors, Michael Cucher and Santiago Guerra, taught us that Anzaldua's work is essential for understanding the history and literature of the borderlands.

Women, Anzaldua argues, have borne the brunt of the racism, classism and sexism that exist both within the dominant Anglo culture and in their own Latino culture. "[T]he indigena in the New Mestiza," she writes, "is a new political stance as a fully racialized feminist Chicana."<sup>4</sup> In her perceptive analysis of *Borderlands*, AnaLouise Keating notes that "rather than going back to some unchanging pre-colonial tradition, Anzaldua remembers the past; she borrows from and alters a variety of belief systems and worldviews, creating an activist-based spirituality that is deeply informed by contemporary events."<sup>5</sup> Anzaldua's activist spirituality urges *mestizas* to take pride in their indigenous heritage. She calls for the forging of a "spiritual *mestizaje*" that rejects all forms of oppression and creates a new, liberating form of religion for the marginalized Chicana/o population. Anzaldua creates a new narrative for the Chicana/o community in a passionate and daring style that few of her contemporaries matched.

The writings of Anzaldua and other Chicana/os in the 1960s and 70s were pivotal in forming an identity that made the Chicana/o people proud of their *mestizo* heritage. Angela Valenzuela, a leading Chicana feminist at the University of Texas at Austin, went to Arizona to fight against the state's proposed elimination of ethnic studies programs in

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<sup>4</sup> Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> AnaLouise Keating, "'I am a Citizen of the Universe': Gloria Anzaldua's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," *Feminist Studies* 34.1-2 (2008): 56.

public schools. In her report for the court that she shared with me, Valenzuela wrote, “one of the legacies of the Chicana/o movement of the 1960s was the activists’ re-articulation of Mexican origin people’s identity that sought to reconnect to the current cultural forms and expressions with an indigenous past.”<sup>6</sup> This re-articulation enabled Chicana/os to take pride in their indigenous ancestry rather than denying it in order to assimilate to the dominant Anglo culture. Valenzuela argues that ethnic studies responds to “structured silences” in history books and to curricula that exclude the history of minority communities, focusing instead on the history of the dominant Anglo culture.<sup>7</sup>

Anzaldúa writes in a mixture of English and Spanish. *Borderlands* reflects the rich *mestizaje* and diversity that have shaped the language and culture of the borderlands. Anzaldúa writes, “there is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience.”<sup>8</sup> This is a critical point, because it is essential to the resistance that Anzaldúa promotes in the Chicana/o community. Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza consciousness,” directed towards her contemporaries in the Chicana community of the 1980s, inhabits a liminal space that is rooted in her own experience growing up as a poor, queer, dark-skinned Chicana.

This life experience gave Anzaldúa a particular understanding of the borderlands and her place in it. She was afflicted by a “fear of going home” and of being rejected by her own people.<sup>9</sup> Anzaldúa notes that she didn’t reject her people: instead, they rejected her, bringing all the pain that rejection implies. She writes, “not me sold out my people, but

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<sup>6</sup> Valenzuela, *Expert Report*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Valenzuela, *Expert Report*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 42.

they me.”<sup>10</sup> Moving beyond her particular situation, however, Anzaldúa gives voice to a unifying and empowering spirituality that is intended for the entire Chicana/o community of the borderlands. As Sheila Marie Contreras notes, “*Borderlands* is distinct in its commitment to sustaining contradictions and residing in the various and liminal ontological, epistemological and geographical zones that Anzaldúa has named the borderlands.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout the book, Anzaldúa underscores the ability of *mestizos* to live within contradictions and ambiguities. Her existential narrative is a moving account of her own attempt to achieve a balance as she lives with these ambiguities.

In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, which Anzaldúa co-edited, she writes that her *mestiza* identity “has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures [Chicano and Anglo] deny me a place in their universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe.”<sup>12</sup> Anzaldúa creates an autonomous universe for herself, one free of the oppressions present in the universes (Chicano and Anglo) that have rejected her. Anzaldúa links this equilibrium and the struggle of which it is a part to her larger political project where she is creating a new *mestiza* consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

### **Anzaldúa’s rejection of Catholicism**

*Borderlands* and other writings by Anzaldúa have shaped the thinking of a generation of scholars and helped to create a new political spirituality. Anzaldúa’s

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<sup>10</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 43.

<sup>11</sup> Sheila Marie Contreras, “Literary Primitivism and ‘the new Mestiza,’” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 8.1 (2006): 51.

<sup>12</sup> *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983) 209.

<sup>13</sup> Keating, *Citizen of the Universe*, 60.



rejection by her own family for being queer, and her rejection in turn of the Catholicism that she learned from her family, led her ultimately to reject all forms of institutionalized religion. Moreover, her rejection by the dominant culture for being a dark-skinned Chicana led Anzaldúa to reject all traditional societal structures that she found to be oppressive. Salvidar-Hull writes that “Anzaldúa reconfigures Chicana affinities with the Catholic Virgen de Guadalupe and offers an alternative image: Coatlicue, the Aztec divine mother. In 1987, few U.S. Mexicana scholars had invoked that name.”<sup>14</sup> Anzaldúa offers an alternate to the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, whom she finds to be too docile and passive a female presence. She turns to *Coatlicue*, a powerful Aztec goddess, as a symbol of female empowerment. Anzaldúa embraces Aztec beliefs and practices as a form of resistance not only to the dominant Anglo culture but also to the Catholic spirituality of the Chicana/o community. Anzaldúa rejects both Western religion and patriarchal Chicano spirituality. She writes, “in my own life, the Catholic Church fails to give meaning to my daily acts, to my continuing encounters with ‘the other world’. It and other institutionalized religions impoverish all life, beauty, pleasure.”<sup>15</sup>

Because of her upbringing and the oppressive form of Catholicism in which she was raised—a Catholicism that made her feel ashamed of her queer identity—Anzaldúa rejects the religious beliefs and practices of her childhood. But Anzaldúa goes further, indicting the Christian tradition as a whole. “[T]he Catholic and Protestant religions,” she writes, “encourage fear and distrust of life and of the body; they encourage a split between the body and the spirit and totally ignore the soul; they encourage us to kill off

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<sup>14</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 59.

parts of ourselves.”<sup>16</sup> It is understandable, given Anzaldúa’s painful childhood and the oppressive form of Catholicism in which she grew up—she was “indoctrinated as straight”—that she would have these strong feelings of revulsion against religion.<sup>17</sup> Anzaldúa, however, is too quick to dismiss all religion as a tool of oppression. She fails to distinguish between the institutional form of Catholicism with which she grew up and the Catholicism that many Chicana/os of the borderlands have created for themselves. This border religion enables Chicana/os to celebrate who they are and to affirm their unique heritage, rooted in *mestizaje*.

### **A Struggling Hybrid Identity**

Anzaldúa mixes Spanish and English to use language to her advantage, and to neutralize both Spanish and English, the two principal colonizing languages of the Americas. This mixture is a product of what Salvidar-Hull calls Anzaldúa’s “hybrid identity,” an identity that “is at war with itself.”<sup>18</sup> Anzaldúa’s language reflects the great *mestizaje* that is taking place in the borderlands. She writes that “the new mestizo copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity.”<sup>19</sup> *Mestizos* are neither fully Mexican nor fully American. The people of the borderlands learn to “juggle cultures.”<sup>20</sup> This seems to be a positive quality but at the same time Anzaldúa insists that “*es difícil* differentiating between *lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto*” (it is difficult

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<sup>16</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 3.

<sup>19</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 101.

<sup>20</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 101.

differentiating between the inherited, the acquired and the imposed).<sup>21</sup> Anzaldúa's words contradict each other by design: she argues that people in the borderlands have a tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity, but she is uneasy not knowing what has been inherited, acquired or imposed. Furthermore, as Erika Aigner-Varoz notes, "Anzaldúa's inter-referencing of Native, Western, and Judeo-Christian metaphors reflects the colliding forces at work within Chicano culture and her own unconscious."<sup>22</sup> Anzaldúa's unique identity helps us to understand this unease.

Anzaldúa's queer identity is a central element of her rejection of the Chicano community and of the larger society of which it is a part. She is an outsider both as a militant *mestiza* and as a queer activist: "nothing in my culture approved of me."<sup>23</sup> Anzaldúa's language is full of estrangement, anger and sadness at her rejection by her own people. The borderlands for Anzaldúa are "not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape."<sup>24</sup> Her emphasis on the dark aspects of the borderlands stems in part from her particular isolation and her anger towards society as a whole and towards the Chicano community in particular. Not being able to go home and not feeling that she belongs anywhere, Anzaldúa defiantly affirms that "if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bridges and mortar and my own feminist architecture."<sup>25</sup> Anzaldúa is unapologetic and refuses to assimilate to the dominant culture. She writes, "as long as I

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<sup>21</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 104.

<sup>22</sup> Erika Aigner-Varoz, "Metaphors of a Mestiza Consciousness: Anzaldúa's Borderlands/ La Frontera," MELUS 25.2 (2000): 56.

<sup>23</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, preface.

<sup>25</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 44.

have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.”<sup>26</sup> Anzaldúa is exhausted by the demands of having to accommodate and to make others feel comfortable. She will no longer apologize for or hide her queer identity, just as she will no longer be made to feel ashamed for her mixture of English and Spanish. By embracing her own identity, Anzaldúa presents herself as a model for the Chicano community. And by rejecting assimilation, she seeks to promote pride in *mestizaje* and in the hybrid beliefs and practices that it has produced.

### **A Trip to the Borderlands**

During block five of this year I took a class entitled “Borders and Borderlands”, taught by Professor Santiago Guerra. We spent two weeks doing fieldwork in the Texas borderlands. As I read Anzaldúa and prepared for our trip, I looked forward to observing the outward forms of rebellion and the rejection of religion that Anzaldúa promoted. We spent our first week in Rio Grande, where Santiago grew up and only a few miles from Anzaldúa's childhood home. I noticed with surprise that part of the highway on which we drove is named after her. The place where Anzaldúa had felt such deep rejection had accepted her—even honoring her memory. I wondered whether she had been able to see this highway after if it was named after her, and whether she achieved some measure of peace, seeing that at long last her own people took pride in her.

Pickup trucks with American flags on their bumpers and *Virgen de Guadalupe* stickers in the back window were a common sight. When we went to visit *La Pulga*, the Saturday flea market in Rio Grande, the sounds and smells made me feel like I was in

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<sup>26</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 81.

Puebla, my hometown in Mexico. If *La Pulga* had been situated only a couple of miles to the south, I would have been in Mexico. This borderland had been part of Mexico until 1848, and *La Pulga* was a demonstration of the permeability of border culture. The only thing that made me remember that we were not in Mexico was the blending of Spanish and English. Young children ran around alternating effortlessly between English and Spanish. Vendors negotiated with a seamless blend of the two languages. Walking around, I realized that I had a continuous smile on my face. People were happy and *la vibra* (the vibe) within *la Pulga* was a contagious one of fun and playfulness. Even the people who were working hard making tacos or negotiating over the price of fruit or clothes seemed to be having a good time laughing or stopping what they were doing to greet a friend passing by.

On Sunday morning in Rio Grande I had the opportunity to attend a Mennonite service with one of Santiago's female relatives. The humble concrete building, painted white, looked more like a house than a church. The feeling of being invited into a kind person's home was heightened as I walked in and was immediately greeted by "hey *hola bienvenida!*" (hi hello welcome!), to which I responded "*gracias mucho gusto*" (thank you very nice to meet you). I felt grateful for the connection that I could make speaking Spanish, and for the strong tie I felt to people when speaking it. Somebody asked me where I was from, and I told her that I grew up for several years in Puebla. Someone else exclaimed "*Ay tengo una tia en Puebla!*" (Oh I have an aunt in Puebla). I felt even more connected to this border community as a Mexican-American who shared deep family ties to Mexico and to Mexican-American history and culture.

I had never been to a Mennonite service and had no idea what to expect. The service was beautiful. The congregation entered through the small front door of the church into an anteroom and then into a larger whitewashed room where the service was held. I was intrigued to see what appeared to be a band on a platform in the front of the room. A drummer, a keyboard player and two singers prepared to play, and a projector counted down the minutes to the beginning of the service in calming white luminescent numbers that gave me a sense of anticipation and of tranquility about the service to come. The first song the band played was in Spanish, and then they switched to a song in English, then back again to Spanish. The singers swayed back and forth with smiles on their faces the entire time they were on the stage. The lyrics were projected onto the screen behind them and lit up as they sang. I was amazed and delighted by the continuous mixing of English and Spanish. Pastor Hernández, a jovial middle-aged man dressed in cowboy boots, jeans and a plaid shirt with a silver bolo tie, quoted Galatians and Corinthians in Spanish and English. He began his sermon by saying “*Hola* welcome todos I am very happy *a verlos hoy dia*” (hello welcome everybody I am very happy to see you all today). I had never heard such hybrid language in a service before, having always gone to Catholic mass with my grandmother in Mexico, where only Spanish was spoken.

### **Reflection and New Understandings**

Traveling in Texas during the week before my visit to the Mennonite church, I had been plagued by frustration. My frustration was due mainly to my relentless efforts to fit my academic assumptions into the lived experience I was seeing on the border. I kept

trying to detect the signs of anger and rebellion that I assumed I would find after reading Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*. But I didn't see what I expected to see. I realize that this was due in part to the fact that I had only had a short time to observe life on the borderlands. Many aspects of the border life that I wanted to explore may have been hidden beneath the surface. I nonetheless wondered whether something may have been missing from my readings. I was witnessing a kind of happiness and serenity that I hadn't expected.

On the second day of our trip, our class visited the Chicano archives at the University of Texas Rio Grande. Our class had been talking about the “deconstitutionalized zone” that was the Rio Grande Valley, where the rights of Chicana/os are routinely violated and state troopers and border patrol are allowed to search people for any “reasonable” cause. I asked Margaret Dorsey, the director of the archives, how Americans who are proud of “the land of the free” could accept the idea that other people were being pulled over and questioned all the time. Ms. Dorsey (a white woman from Chicago), replied vaguely, and said that she could not understand the mentality of some of the people—mostly Anglos—in the borderlands, and that she felt “very caged” living in the Rio Grande Valley.

After the class conversation with Ms. Dorsey, a classmate who—unlike Ms. Dorsey—grew up in Brownsville gently came up to me and said “I grew up here [in the Rio Grande Valley], and what Ms. Dorsey said about feeling caged or being angry about state troopers and the border patrol is not how people here feel. We aren't angry and we don't feel caged... it's just how it is.” After talking with my classmate, I felt embarrassed by my conversation with Ms. Dorsey. We had projected our outsider feelings onto people who have lived their entire lives in the Valley. As outsiders who have never been in an

area that is so heavily patrolled by law enforcement, we felt that our movements were restricted, and we were uncomfortable being in a place where we thought that the police and border patrol were routinely violating the rights of the majority of the Valley's residents. I found myself feeling embarrassed by my own assumptions. I had assumed that the people who lived in Rio Grande shared the feeling of being “caged” that I felt when visiting the border, and that they were as outraged as I was about the violations of the civil rights of the Chicana/o community.

My classmate who had grown up in the Valley said that when she visited Colorado for the first time she was shocked that she did not see any state troopers. She asked her aunt where the state troopers were and her aunt, who had also lived her entire life in the Valley, was equally surprised and answered uncertainly, “I don’t think they have them [state troopers] here.” The experience of being watched constantly had been normalized to them and they felt no anxiety over their continual surveillance. Ironically, their anxiety came from the absence of surveillance. The outsider perspective that Ms. Dorsey and I brought to the Valley had nothing to do with the lived experience of inhabitants of the borderlands themselves. I realized I needed to develop a greater awareness of my misplaced projections.

My conversation with my classmate and my observations at the Mennonite church, along with other incidents throughout my visit to the borderlands made me wonder about the validity of Anzaldúa’s rhetoric from the 1980s in light of the lived experience I was witnessing. Anzaldúa calls on Chicana/os to reject all institutionalized religion in order to move forward and create “a new consciousness.” Her argument briefly convinced me that religion oppresses the people of the borderlands and that they



would likely reject religion, as she had. My visit to the Valley, however, showed me that for many people the opposite is true.

Religion and institutional Christianity play a central role in the lives of many people of the borderlands. Rather than oppressing them, religion has given them a sense of joy and hope in their daily lives. The Mennonite service was only one example of the joy and hope religion gives to the people I met. In *La Pulga* there was stand after stand of people selling little *Virgens* and candles with various Catholic saints who bring special healing and protective powers to the people of the Valley. Almost everyone I met spoke about his or her faith in Jesus and *La Virgen*. Anzaldúa's political ideology did not correspond to the lived experience that I witnessed. Anzaldúa speaks from her own experience and the experiences of other marginalized peoples. My fieldwork, however, helped me see that she is not speaking for everyone. There is more to life in the borderlands than is suggested in Anzaldúa's narrative, with its emphasis on struggle, resistance and opposition.

### **Saba Mahmood and a Different Type of Agency**

Saba Mahmood, like Anzaldúa, is an influential feminist scholar. Mahmood and Anzaldúa differ, however, in their approach to religion in general and to agency in particular. Mahmood is an anthropologist who focuses on the forms of empowerment that are available to Muslim women. For many Western feminists and scholars, the seeming passivity of Muslim women points to oppression and lack of agency. In *Politics of Piety*, however, Mahmood convincingly rejects "the normative liberal assumptions about human nature against which [empowerment among Muslim women] is held

accountable.”<sup>27</sup> Mahmood argues that Western feminists assume that everyone has the same “desire[s] for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them.”<sup>28</sup> Mahmood’s aim is to show that alongside western notions of freedom, agency and resistance, there exist forms of agency within seemingly oppressive Islamic societal and religious structures, and that people—for example the Muslim women she studies—do not necessarily want to resist these structures.

Mahmood notes that “[paying] attention to the forms of resistance in particular societies can help us become critical of partial or reductionist theories of power.”<sup>29</sup> This attention to different forms of resistance provides a lens with which to explore the limitations of Anzaldúa's work. Anzaldua was a progressive voice for her time, underscoring problems in borderlands society that others did not want to confront. Anzaldúa failed, however, to see what Mahmood points to in her critique of Western liberalism and progressivism—namely, that forms of agency can take shape within and not outside institutional religious structures. Mahmood writes, “what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency.”<sup>30</sup> Among other examples, Mahmood notes that Westerners who condemn the wearing of veils by Muslim women are misguided, for the wearing of veils often empowers Muslim women and serves as a form of resistance to Western values that

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<sup>27</sup> Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) 5.

<sup>28</sup> Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, 30.

many Muslims—both men and women—reject. Agency, Mahmood argues, may often be found in the ways in which people “inhab[it] norms,” including norms that Westerners observe to be oppressive for women.<sup>31</sup>

In calling for the creation of a new *mestiza* consciousness, Anzaldúa points to examples of what she appears to consider “deplorable passivity and docility” in the Chicana/o population, often criticizing her own mother and other Chicanas for their submissiveness to the males in their lives. She insists that women not let themselves be subjected to men’s oppressive rule. In rejecting her own society and the dominant culture in general, however, Anzaldúa does not realize that she is putting forth a reductive view of the experience of Chicana/os, who are freer within their own society and their own religious structures than she suggests. The freedom that Anzaldúa wishes for is not the kind of freedom that many people in her entire community desire. We must recognize, as Mahmood notes, “that the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is also profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions.”<sup>32</sup> Although Anzaldúa would not necessarily call herself a “Westerner,” she embodies the limitations of the rhetoric of resistance and rebellion in liberal Western culture. When Anzaldúa writes, for example, that “I will overcome the tradition of silence,” she ignores the active role of the Chicana/o community in its accommodation of traditional societal and religious structures.<sup>33</sup>

If Anzaldúa were to take a step back and realize that freedom and agency ironically take ambiguous forms that are not universal, she would perhaps become more

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<sup>31</sup> Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 80.

open to the religious traditions of the people of the borderlands. This greater openness would make room for Mahmood's insight that freedom "consists in the ability to autonomously 'choose' one's desires no matter how illiberal they may be."<sup>34</sup> Chicana/os are free to choose whatever form of religion suits their needs. The institutional Catholic Church rejected Andalzúa. By rejecting Catholicism in turn, however, Anzaldúa is too quick to dismiss the Catholic religion as oppressive and hurtful. She does not leave room for the joy and freedom it gives to others in her community who find spiritual sustenance within the institutional confines of the church.

Like Anzaldúa, the Latina feminist Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz seeks to liberate Latinas from what she sees as constant oppression. In *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, Isasi-Diaz writes that "one of the main goals of *mujerista* theology is to enhance the development of the moral agency of Hispanic women."<sup>35</sup> She argues that struggle and agency are intertwined. Women must have a consciousness of struggle that will in turn make them agents of change and resistance in the face of oppressive structures. Isasi-Diaz writes that "struggle and agency... do not exist apart from praxis"<sup>36</sup> and that "survival for Hispanic women means a constant struggle against oppression."<sup>37</sup> Like the views of Andalzúa, however, Isasi-Diaz's views about Hispanic women and their common struggle are problematic in light of Mahmood's exploration of the many forms that agency and freedom may take.

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<sup>34</sup> Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha, In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 150.

<sup>36</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 176.

<sup>37</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 34.

In developing her *mujerista* theology and proposing a new political consciousness for Latinas similar to Anzaldúa's, Isasi-Diaz makes overarching generalizations for a diverse group of women. These generalizations fail to address the subtle forms of agency to which Mahmood points. Above all, agency may exist without *lucha*, without struggle; the two are not as intertwined as Isasi-Diaz would have us believe. Furthermore, survival does not always require a fight against oppression. Part of the reason why so much indigenous culture has survived within the Catholicism of the borderlands, and that such widespread *mestizaje* has occurred in society as a whole, is that the Indigenous peoples assimilated the beliefs and practices of the conquistadors. Their agency consisted in part in their having ingeniously figured out how to interweave their own religious beliefs and practices and the Catholic faith of the people who conquered them, thus creating the great *mestizaje* that is characteristic of borderlands Catholicism today. Isasi-Diaz writes that the Church "must recognize the right of the person to follow one's conscience. This means that the faithful must have essential, inner freedom, as well as effective, external freedom."<sup>38</sup> If this is the case, as I believe it is, then Isasi-Diaz must reconcile herself to the fact that people have the freedom to choose the religious tradition they wish to follow, no matter how illiberal and oppressive that tradition may seem to outsiders.

Isasi-Diaz and Anzaldúa employ a similar rhetoric of *lucha* (struggle) in order to help forge a political consciousness that will change structures they find oppressive. Their focus on struggle, however, blinds them to much of the beauty and joy that religion has given to Latina/os. They both feel a certain unease at not being entirely at home anywhere. Isasi-Diaz writes that "this chaos, this uprootedness, this not-having-a-place-

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<sup>38</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 157.

to-call-home—these are the main reasons why our central preoccupation in this society is and has to be survival.”<sup>39</sup> Anzaldúa shared this sentiment, not feeling like she belonged anywhere and learning to survive on her own.

Just surviving, however, was not the driving force of what I saw in my time in Rio Grande. There was no sense of uprootedness in the people I met. The Rio Grande was their home and they were proud of it, as my friend who grew up there told me with a smile. The continuous parade of trucks with La Virgen de Guadalupe stickers on the rear windshield and the United States flag on the bumper was no accident. The people I met did not, as far as I could tell, feel oppressed by religion or by the dominant culture. They embraced the contradictions of the border and moved forward with their lives. Going to church and traveling among the people of the borderlands, I realized that Christianity in all its forms, and the devotion of the community to *La Virgen* and to Jesus, gave the people of the borderlands a foundation of hope and happiness in their lives. They celebrated ambiguities rather than merely tolerating them, and they did not seem to struggle in embracing *mestizaje*. This is not to say that the Chicana/os of the border do not struggle. I question, however, Anzaldúa’s understanding of the oppression of the people of the border, and I propose a reconceptualization based on my readings and on my experience in Texas. During my two weeks in the borderlands, I saw the Chicana/o community embrace ambiguities and accept the creative interplay between their own traditions and those of the Anglo community of which they are an integral part.

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<sup>39</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 183.

## **Marta Cotera and the Catholic Church**

On our last day in Austin I had the honor of interviewing Marta Cotera, a leading Chicana feminist and a contemporary of Anzaldúa. Unlike Anzaldúa, however, Marta has made her way to a Catholicism that embraces and empowers Chicanas. My conversation with Marta helped me to clarify my understanding of the religion and culture of the borderlands. Marta spoke about religion and *mestizaje* and showed me the joy that religion brought to her and to other Chicana/os.

Marta is an old woman now but throughout the afternoon I spent with her I was in awe of her powerful and commanding presence. She greeted me with a kind smile and a warm and strong embrace. Talking with her, I realized what a courageous woman she is and what a powerful voice she has been for Chicanas and for the Chicano movement as a whole. She was a prominent member of La Raza Unida party during the 1960s and 70s, and she co-founded *Mujeres Por La Raza*, working tirelessly on social justice issues. Marta spoke to me for three hours about the formative role of Catholicism in her life and work. Our conversation helped me understand what I had been observing during my week in the borderlands. Specifically, it helped me to integrate my understanding of religion in general, and of Catholicism in particular, into my emerging view of the border.

Marta was born in Mexico in 1936. When she was a child her family immigrated to El Paso, Texas, where she grew up. Marta was raised Protestant and converted to Catholicism in her early twenties. She believed that the Catholic faith was more open to women than Protestantism. She is quick to underscore, however, the difference between her own Catholic faith and the institutional form of Catholicism that dominated the west

Texas church that she joined. In an essay that analyzes Marta's religious journey, Brenda Sendejo notes that, like Andalzúa, Marta has created a spiritually based activism.<sup>40</sup>

Cotera's activism, however, is rooted in the Catholic faith. Sendejo argues that “Cotera’s spirituality is deeply intertwined with her feminism and activism... she too is questioning the Catholic faith today, but upholding the values of Christ and her relationship with the Virgen of Guadalupe-Tonantzin, both deeply infused with an ethic of social justice and equality.”<sup>41</sup> For Marta there was never a division between spirituality and activism.

Marta told me that her Christian values reinforced her commitment to social justice. “The most sincere movement people were practicing Christians,” she said.

Marta’s Catholicism allows her to embrace those aspects of the religion that empower her and to ignore those that limit her. Catholicism was first attractive to Marta because of the presence of women. She told me that “the Catholic Church did a lot to exalt women through its depictions of Virgins and Saints.” With eyebrows raised slightly, she asserted that in the case of Mexico, “without the Virgin, I don’t know if it would have been such an easy conquest.”

For Marta, “it all goes back to the female deity.” Unlike Anzaldúa, who rejected Catholicism because of the many elements of the religion that she found to be oppressive, Marta was able to "compartmentalize" in order to work on behalf of the Chicano community.<sup>42</sup> Marta says that “La Raza Unida is like the Catholic Church: You don’t

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<sup>40</sup> Brenda Sendejo, “The Cultural Production of Spiritual Activisms: Gender, Social Justice, and the Remaking of Religion in the Borderlands,” *Chicana/ Latina Studies* 12.2 (2013): 72.

<sup>41</sup> Sendejo, *Spiritual Activism*, 72.

<sup>42</sup> Sendejo, *Spiritual Activism*, 89.



have to like it all. You have to be able to see the real cause and issues.”<sup>43</sup> In a funny but poignant moment, Marta chuckled and said to me, “the guys talked the talk but we forced them to walk the talk.” Being in Marta’s presence, I did not doubt that statement for a second. What caught me off guard was one of her last remarks. She said, “I cannot conceive of feminism without spirituality just as I cannot conceive of the Chicano movement without Christianity.” I was initially surprised by this comment. But upon reflection on what I had seen during the week in Rio Grande and on my afternoon with Marta, I understood the truth of her statement and the embrace of contradictions that lay behind it. The *mestizo* Catholicism that the people of the borderlands had created for themselves helped them to create a new hybrid society that encompassed the many traditions—Spanish, Anglo, and indigenous—that they had inherited.

### **Poetics of *Mestizaje***

Virgilio Elizondo is a Chicano theologian who has written about the poetics of *mestizaje* and the specific Catholicism present in this hybrid world of the border.

Elizondo is a contemporary of Anzaldúa and Marta. Growing up in San Antonio, he had similar feelings of living between worlds and being an “insider-outsider” in both Mexican and American culture. Regardless of his discomfort, however, Elizondo recognized the United States as his home, accepting the good and the bad.

It was during his time in seminary and his engagement with life in San Antonio that Elizondo began to recognize “that new life was emerging... the life of the Mexican-

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<sup>43</sup> Sendejo, *Spiritual Activism*, 88.

American *mestizaje*.”<sup>44</sup> His anxiety about being neither one nor the other disappeared and he exclaims poignantly and with pride, “I was a rich mixture but I was not mixed up!”<sup>45</sup> This revelation led Elizondo to devote his work as a priest and theologian to exploring and strengthening the *mestizo* community of the borderlands.

In *The Future is Mestizo*, Elizondo writes that “the more we appreciate the humanity of the Scriptures, the more we appreciate their divinity.”<sup>46</sup> God chose Jesus, a poor man from Galilee, as the savior of the world. Mexican-Americans can see the similarities between their situation and the earthly plight of Jesus Christ, who like them was a *mestizo* living between two worlds. Jesus, like the Mexican-American people, came from indeterminate origins in Galilee, a frontier between two great civilizations. Jesus was a “cultural mestizo.”<sup>47</sup> Living in Galilee was “very much like being a Mexican-American in Texas.”<sup>48</sup> As a Jew from Galilee, he was too Jewish for the Gentiles and not Jewish enough for the Jews of Jerusalem. Jesus adopted traits from both groups of people, leading Elizondo to conclude that, “culturally and linguistically speaking, Jesus was a mestizo.”<sup>49</sup> The Mexican-American people can take pride in their *mestizaje* and in their embrace of the *mestizaje* that they share with Jesus and his mother (*La Virgen*).

Elizondo makes a poignant comparison between Jesus—a man of mixed heritage from Galilee—and the *mestizo* people of the borderlands. “Jesus breaks the barriers of separation, as does every mestizo... We usher in a new life for the betterment of

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Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet*. (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000) 26.

<sup>45</sup> Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo*, 80.

<sup>47</sup> Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo*, 77.

<sup>49</sup> Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo*, 79.

everyone when we freely and consciously assume the great traditions flowing through our veins and transcend them, not by denying either but by synthesizing them into something new.”<sup>50</sup> I witnessed this beautiful synthesis in Rio Grande. The people did not deny one part of themselves in favor of the other. Instead, they fully embraced both the Mexican and the American parts of their identity.

Davíd Carrasco, a Latino historian of religion, sees Elizondo’s words as an example of “border epistemology.”<sup>51</sup> This epistemology points to the way in which “oppressed peoples recognize their identities in colonial situations by creating new, hybrid forms of knowledge.”<sup>52</sup> They acknowledge the oppression they have had to endure but they are able to move beyond the pain—always remembering it—in order to create a new borderlands religion and culture and a new community of proud *mestizos*. This is what Marta does in her practice of Catholicism: she reads the Scriptures for their humanity and not for the rules that they contain. This is what I heard when I attended the Mennonite service, where Pastor Hernandez quoted the most welcoming and compassionate passages of Corinthians and Galatians and did so in English and Spanish.

### **Reading and Experience**

I came to understand and appreciate the hybridity of border culture and religion after I reworked my academic assumptions in light of the lived experience I was witnessing. The visit gave me a deeper understanding of life in the borderlands. Having read Anzaldúa, I was expecting to see outward displays of anger and rebellion against

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<sup>50</sup> Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo*, 84.

<sup>51</sup> David Carrasco, “Borderlands and the ‘biblical hurricane’: Images and Stories of Latin American Rhythms of Life,” *Harvard Theological Review* 101.3-4 (2008): 368.

<sup>52</sup> Carrasco, “*Borderlands and the ‘biblical hurricane’*”, 368.

Christianity and the dominant culture. I did not expect to see the opposite. After my first two days in Rio Grande, I overcame my frustration at my inability to see past my preconceived notions of life in the borderlands. Out of sheer desperation and exhaustion, I e-mailed my thesis advisor, Devaka Premawardhana. I wrote, "I am not seeing anything I thought I would see!" One sentence in his helpful response was especially important in the reshaping of my thinking. Devaka wrote, "clarity will come, particularly when you cease trying to resist the evidence before you and simply go with it rather than trying to insist on your own intellectual concerns." I read this sentence over and over again. Then I took a deep breath and walked around the neighborhood in Rio Grande in which we were staying.

The night I received Devaka's e-mail we went to an *asada* (Mexican-style barbecue) hosted by Santiago's aunt. At the *asada* I was speaking to Miguel Allende (Margaret Dorsey's husband), an anthropologist who studies the borderlands. I asked him what people in the Rio Grande Valley think about *mestizaje*. Miguel laughed quietly and explained with a somewhat dismissive wave of his hand that most people would not apply the word *mestizaje* to their everyday lived experience. People who call the borderlands home use their own language and self-understandings to define the liminal space in which they live. I was encountering the phenomenon that the anthropologist Robert Orsi encountered in the course of his fieldwork. Orsi writes that "to do fieldwork in religion is to find ourselves in places where we are intellectually and personally vulnerable and where our theories, when we speak some version of them to our

interlocutors, sound uncertain, strange, or even hollow.”<sup>53</sup> This was exactly how I felt when Miguel dismissed my question as irrelevant.

I was embarrassed that my academic language and instincts seemed to have nothing to do with the actual lives people that lived on the border. Orsi asks his readers, “Are we really going to deny that we may be brought up short by religious experience, that we may be taken aback, shocked, or unsettled? Or that when we meet the other in the field we apprehend something of us, something denied or desired, in the encounter?”<sup>54</sup> During the beginning of my week in Rio Grande I was constantly taken aback and unsettled, wishing and trying relentlessly to see any signs of anger or rebellion or pride rooted in *mestizaje*, and never seeing any of these signs. Devaka's letter and my conversation with Miguel helped me to understand the danger of imposing my academic assumptions on the lived experience of the people of the borderlands. These assumptions had kept me from becoming fully aware of realities that differed from the one I was expecting to see. They had blinded me to all the happiness around me.

As noted earlier, my conversation with my classmate helped me to become more aware of the danger of projecting my outsider feelings onto people who called the borderlands their home and had an innate pride in their homeland. As Orsi notes, “religion is what scholars of religion engage when they leave their studies and come back to them in time, chastened, unsettled, and no longer so confident in their theories, often distressed in some way, and exhausted.”<sup>55</sup> I felt all those feelings at the beginning of my experience in Rio Grande, falling asleep exhausted but also deeply unsettled every night.

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<sup>53</sup> Robert H. Orsi, “Roundtable on Ethnography and Religion: Doing Religious Studies with Your Whole Body.” *Practical Matters*. 2 (2013) 3.

<sup>54</sup> Orsi, *Roundtable on Ethnography and Religion*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Orsi, *Roundtable on Ethnography and Religion* 2.

After rethinking my initial assumptions and shifting my expectations, I was finally able to see things more clearly. I stopped trying to resist what I was seeing and I also came to understand what I was not seeing. I was not seeing anger, rebellion or the mere passive toleration of ambiguities. Instead, I was seeing the embrace of ambiguities.

Anzaldúa was a key figure in the creation of a new political consciousness for marginalized Chicana/os. Because of her experience of struggle, however, Anzaldúa was not able to see the joy and hope that the people of the borderlands created for themselves, drawing on their *mestizo* heritage and especially on the hybrid Catholicism that had taken root with the conquest of Mexico. As I was reading Anzaldúa's rejection of religion, I was reminded of Marx's critique of religion as the opiate of the masses. Anzaldúa similarly rejected all institutional religion as oppressive, but unlike Marx, Anzaldúa improvised her own religious beliefs. In so doing, she defied the boundaries of the Catholicism in which she was raised. "I'm trying," Anzaldúa wrote, "to create a religion not out there somewhere, but in my gut. I am trying to make peace between what has happened to me, what the world is, and what it should be."<sup>56</sup> Anzaldúa was able to create a religion that liberated her. I would argue, with Mahmood, however, that people have the freedom to express their religiosity in a variety of forms, some of which may seem oppressive to critics.

As an outsider who has only limited experience of life on the border, I am not privy to some of the knowledge and feelings that lie beneath the surface. My observations in Texas, however, led me to rethink theories that I had formed on the basis of my readings. Anzaldúa's experience as a dark-skinned queer Chicana growing up in the

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<sup>56</sup> Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 208.

borderlands during the 1950s led her to create a new political consciousness for her people. Her work has inspired the generations that have followed her. I too am inspired by Anzaldúa, even as I seek to put forward another perspective on life in the borderlands that is rooted not only in my readings but also in the cultural and religious traditions that I observed in Texas. Amidst the pain and resistance that all peoples experience, I saw the pride of the *mestizo* people and the love and joy of the *mestizaje* that has shaped their lives.

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