Chicanx Aesthetic Expressions of Resistance: Making Art and Spirit through Altars and Writing[*]

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Many scholars argue that the spiritual dimensions of aesthetic practices and resistance have been undertheorized or omitted. This paper examines aesthetic processes taken up by Amelia Mesa-Bains (1994, 1999) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 2015) to theorize how some Chicanx artists employ an aesthetic based on spirituality as relational, memorial, and material practice to critique colonial ideologies embedded in dichotomies such as man/woman, subject/object, fine/folk art, and individual/community. By focusing on Mesa-Bains' altar installations and Anzaldúa's writing process, I draw out how social relations and memory work operate to interpret the relationship between aesthetics and spirituality. I argue that the relational dynamic of their aesthetic sensibilities and techniques show ways some Chicanx scholars and artists subscribe to a sense of spirituality that maintains interconnected relations with others who have been disempowered and marginalized.

To support this position, in the first half of the paper, I analyze the relational sensibilities central to Chicanx aesthetic sensibility of rasquache domesticana, *which highlights the concrete spaces in which Chicanx, their aesthetic perception, and techniques generate a communal resistance that is sustained through spirituality. The second half turns to Mesa-Bains' altar installation for Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1994) and Anzaldúa's writing process described in Borderlands (1987) to clarify ways in which aesthetics and spiritual relations engender practices of resistance to social dichotomies.*

Key words: aesthetics; resistance; Chicanx; spirituality; altars; writing

This article addresses the role of spirituality in Chicanx art theory and art practices.[1] Many Latinx studies scholars argue that the spiritual dimensions of aesthetic practices and resistance have been undertheorized or omitted.[2] For instance, Chicana scholar Laura E. Pérez contends that this omission has regarded spirituality as "a minefield" that is linked to colonial religiosity and thus overlooked as a source of social and political emancipation (Pérez 2007). This paper examines aesthetic processes taken up by Amelia Mesa-Bains (1994, 1999) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 2015) to theorize how some Chicanx artists employ an aesthetic based on spirituality as relational, memorial, and material practice to critique colonial ideologies embedded in dichotomies such as man/woman, subject/object, fine/folk art, and individual/community.[3] The analysis shows how Mesa-Bains' altar installations and

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Anzaldúa's writing process reframe social dynamics and engage memory work in their interpretations of aesthetics and spirituality. I argue that the relational dynamic of their aesthetic sensibilities and techniques show ways some Chicanx scholars and artists subscribe to a sense of spirituality that maintains interconnected relations with others who have been disempowered and marginalized.

To support this position, first, I analyze the relational sensibilities central to Chicanx aesthetics through a lens of *rasquache* and *rasquache domesticana* as developed by Ybarra-Frausto (1989) and Mesa-Bains, respectively.[4] The scholars contextualize an aesthetic sensibility of the "underdog" and generate a counter-cultural aesthetic to dichotomous relational norms such as subject/object and fine art vs. folk art. *Rasquache* can be enacted daily to refuse dominant standards that devalue and exclude Chicanx peoples and their knowledge. The Chicanx aesthetic sensibility of *rasquache domesticana* highlights the concrete spaces in which Chicanx, their aesthetic perception, and techniques generate a communal resistance that is sustained through spirituality. Next, I turn to Mesa-Bains' altar installation for Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1994) and Anzaldúa's writing process described in *Borderlands* (1987) to clarify ways in which aesthetics and spiritual relations engender practices of resistance to social dichotomies. This paper finds that Mesa-Bains' and Anzaldúa's artistic and remembering processes support an aesthetic sensibility of a communal spirituality that asserts non-hierarchical, interdependent relations beyond rigid binaries.

1 Chicanx Aesthetic Theories: *Rasquache* Ways of Creating

Rising from a time of social and political activism at the height of the Chicano Movement,[5] Chicanx scholars and activists created forms of resistance against and within the legacies of Spanish and Anglo colonial powers. The Chicanx circumstance of double subjugation motivates how Chicanx aesthetic sensibilities across generations renewed their sense of selfhood and community. Art historians Guisela Latorre (2019) and Jennifer González (2019) find that generations of Chicanx artists, from the 1960s to the current day, employ aesthetic methodologies and strategies grounded in defiance, community empowerment, and creative transformation. Informed by multiple genealogies of knowledge and community practices with Nahua, Maya, and Lakota peoples, and Black and Asian peoples, many Chicanx would challenge hierarchical gender dichotomies that inferiorize women and queer people.[6]

Identifying these influences and community relations is helpful to describe some of the threads of cultural, historical, and epistemological traditions relevant to how some Chicanx artists are theorizing resistance through processes of making and un-making ways of knowing and being. In this section, I flesh out Chicanx aesthetic sensibilities through two foundational theories and practices of Chicanx aesthetics: *rasquache* and *rasquache domesticana* by Ybarra-Frausto and Mesa-Bains, respectively. I argue that their works are significant to elaborate on characteristics of Chicanx aesthetic sensibility, namely in attitude, gestures, resistance, and memory work. The multifaceted aesthetic sensibilities informing Chicanx aesthetics include the aforementioned social and historical dimensions but also maintain an active and dynamic relation that is important for how Chicanx peoples expand their networks of relations. This is to say that given their social position as marginalized peoples, and the multiple epistemologies that inform their theory, the Chicanx artists and theorists discussed in this paper base their sensibilities on a shared communal sense that includes people from different time periods and non-human "objects."

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The communal sensibility that is important to the Chicanx *rasq*uache is meant to emphasize a socially engaged aesthetic process that is deeply relational. Nancy Tuana's and Charles Scott's view of "sensibilities" is helpful to draw out the social and epistemological dimensions involved in aesthetic sense-making.[7] In their article "Border Arte Philosophy: Altogether Beyond Philosophy," the authors draw attention to the significance of contextualizing meanings and processes that inform aesthetic practices. Sensibilities involve an aesthetic sensing that weaves and re-weaves together worlds "historical in their origins and inherent in specific institutions, rituals, and symbols" (Tuana and Scott 2018: 74). The dynamic social lineages, or worlds that comprise one's sensibility, include knowledge shared across generations, both culturally and systematically. In this respect, aesthetic sensing allows one to co-create worlds by perceiving and discerning ways of knowing, affective responses, bodily gestures, and inhabiting one's daily surroundings. The social processes are inherently relational and involve complex differences and tensions. In fact, Tuana and Scott assert that one's sensibilities are permeable, creative, and often comprised of incompatibilities (Tuana and Scott 2018: 75). This is to say that sensibilities are not neatly coherent, static, or unified. Following this view, the Chicanx aesthetic sensibilities I refer to describe the complex meanings, relational processes, and embodied practices that are socially and historically relevant to how Chicanx theorists articulate *rasquache* and interpret spirituality, which I discuss later in the paper.

Rasquachismo, an almost ineffable sensibility, refers to a collective belonging of outsider-ness in juxtaposition to and with norms of taste and decorum. Ybarra-Frausto insists, "to be rasquache is to posit a bawdy, spunky consciousness seeking to subvert and turn ruling paradigms upside down-a witty, irreverent, and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries" (Ybarra-Frausto 1989: 85). From a "lower" status and marginalized position, Chicanx artists employing *rasquache* directly respond to the material and social issues that historically have troubled Chicanx communities, including land dispossession, police brutality, incarceration, deportation, underfunded educational programs, among others related to U.S systems of power. Given these circumstances, Ybarra-Frausto theorizes Chicanx *rasquache* taste as an attitude of the downtrodden that takes that which is deemed value-less or "low" quality in society and creates an alternative aesthetic from the underdog perspective to make "a sort of good taste of bad taste" (Ybarra-Frausto 1989).

The *rasquache* sensibility challenges dichotomous aesthetic categories of high/low through its aesthetic practice and through its socially relational orientation. Ybarra-Frausto attests to the social and political position of the *rasquache*, a person starkly positioned against dominant groups and who creates from what is around and available to them, almost as part of the local ecosystem. Attention to the ordinary supports an everyday aesthetic that maintains a fluid relationality. It can be employed in something like a walk through the *barrio*, an open sense that allows for a play between how an external "object" is captivating you and how you are imagining with the "object."[8] An openness to possibilities of creating with all "objects" is unlike a typical subject/object distinction made in mainstream art practices. In the traditional framework, the subject, that is, the artist, is an animate person who sets out to use an object, an inferiorized and inanimate thing, for some artistic project. Said differently, the subject maintains space from the object to constitute the creation of the object as art. The *rasquache* artist blurs the division of the subject/object, revealing an interactive relation between the artist and the "object." Taking that which is deemed "discarded" and "broken," the *rasquache* accumulates the "objects" and creates from a world view that subverts their assigned inferiority. In doing so, the *rasquache* embellishes and ornaments what Chicanx people have around to express cultural style but as a socially embedded art practice (Mesa-Bains 1999: 92).

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As the reader can see, the relationality of *rasquachismo* involves a lived, playful sensibility based on material interaction with ordinary "things" of the world. The sensibility embodied in the artist's practice of creating with all "things" *rasquache* located outside of the established popular standards of taste or value, even those of a restaurant or a car (Ybarra-Frausto 1989: 85). For instance, a rusted "old" pickup truck may be seen and treated as junk or useless from a dominant utilitarian lens. Moreover, from an aesthetic standard of taste, the truck might not be an aesthetic medium. However, for Chicanx *rasquache*, engaging with a car is an experience of creating with those "objects" that are not permanent or closed and making do with what is available. The car then maintains an openness to be an aesthetic vessel carrying an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the hood, for example.[9] From an open, porous, and playful perspective, *rasquache* permits creative interaction with tires, cars, and altars, the focus of the next section. By perceiving "objects" through a fluid relational lens, the artist does not box them into a solely utilitarian functionality nor concern them with dichotomous relational dynamics.

Rasquache employs a relational dynamic based on communal desires, needs, and practices. It is part of a quotidian social interaction engaged with the material realities of the environment in which the *rasquache* artist belongs. Ybarra-Frausto describes the relational social activity as part of a "cosmic will to be" (Ybarra-Frausto 1989: 88). From this interdependent network of relations, the *rasquache* employs a sensibility dedicated towards a collective and relational purpose of "the elemental daily struggles for survival" (Ybarra-Frausto 1989: 88). Mesa-Bains describes the survivalist dimension of *rasquache* asserting it is "a combination of resistant and resilient attitudes devised to allow the Chicano to survive and preserve with a sense of dignity" (Mesa-Bains 1999: 92). *Rasquache* entails a collective sensibility grounded in its social contexts and the environment, which spur a co-creative process unrestrained by rigid boundaries and aesthetic boundaries.

Following Ybarra-Frausto's aesthetic attention to the "facets of *rasquachismo* as a conceptual lifestyle and aesthetic strategy" (Ybarra-Frausto 1989: 89), scholar and theorist Mesa-Bains develops *domesticana*. This aesthetic practice addresses social and political conditions, such as restrictive gender roles in the domestic sphere and the *barrio*. Mesa-Bains theorizes the aesthetic sensibility as a basis for analyzing feminine roles and spaces and to re-interpret cultural traditions and practices. The photographic work of Mari Hernandez, *La Quinceanera,* helps with this point.[10] The series displays a birthday celebrant, also known as a quinceañera, gowned in a lavish white dress with US dollars printed across the body, dollar sign ($) necklaces of gold and diamonds, and a sparkly tiara. Traditionally, a quinceañera event celebrates a fifteenth birthday and represents a rite of passage to womanhood in many Latin American and Latinx cultures.[11] Depending on the region and religious influences, the "coming of age" celebration might include a religious ceremony and a party among family, friends, and sometimes the community.

Hernandez employs the *rasquache domesticana* in the self-photographic images to bring visual attention to capitalist industries that target working-class families and communities. The image backdrop is a curtain of printed dollars meant to symbolize how capitalist endeavors have seeped into the cultural tradition. Setting the *quinceañera* and her gown at the fore, the artist positions herself as an active agent critiquing the fashion and event planning industries that mass market excessive glam and extravagant celebrations.[12] The artist re-fashions mainstream notions of *quinceañera* culture and traditional cultural practices of the *quinceañera* as a rite of passage towards womanhood. This aesthetic technique displays

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a *domesticana* sensibility because Hernandez's *Quinceañera* series generates an "underdog" response to the social and collective issues from a traditionally feminized position.

The dual dimensions of critique and revaluing are important to the artistic creation. Mesa-Bains' postulates that the Chicanx aesthetic sensibility enables resistance to colonial structures of patriarchy while also strengthening an interconnected social relationality. She writes, "The centrality of family life directs the *domesticana*, and Chicanas are frequently raised in hierarchical roles of male over female, old over young" (Mesa-Bains 1999: 94). In spaces like the home, one could re-envision hierarchical social dynamics and establish alternative networks of relations with others. This is to say that social relationships between those relegated to gendered spaces, like the kitchen, are able to revalue the space by collectively sharing knowledge, techniques, and practices across generations and social status in the family. Mesa-Bains writes, "For Chicana artists using the *rasquache* stance, their work takes on a deeper meaning of domestic tension as the signs of making do are both an affirmation of the domestic life and a resistance to the subjugation of women in the domestic sphere" (Mesa-Bains 1999: 95).

As a dual process of subversion and affirmation, *domesticana* participates in a creative tension that is experienced in home spaces and with meanings of the past and present. Mesa-Bains elaborates, "Cherished moments stand side by side with examinations of self, culture, and history in visions of a domestic chamber that is both paradise and prison" (Mesa-Bains 1999: 95). The juxtaposition of paradise and prison allude to the ways women in domestic spaces establish meaningful relations with others, materially present and not, who are similarly subjugated by cultural and colonial divisions of gender roles and power.

Through techniques that play with traditional images and cultural material, the *domesticana* engages a sensibility that weaves multilayered expressions of gender, sexuality, power, and identity across histories and traditions from an emancipatory position (Mesa-Bains 1999: 98). Playfulness enacts a process of re-historicization that refuses the inferior attributes assigned to women across generations and instead offers an alternative perspective. The temporal play is not embedded in solely present experiences or future occurrences. Mesa-Bains explains that some artists retrieve that which is considered "past" to destabilize the "wounds of patriarchy and colonization" and include subjugated people, their knowledge, and images in art practices (Mesa-Bains 1999: 96-8). The *domesticana* generates meanings with traditional conceptions of space, objects, and memories to reposition herself in relation to the feminine past. The *rasquache* aesthetic employs a mode of operating that can attend to the historical violence and continuous harms of Spanish colonialism, U.S. Anglo domination, and internal community trauma. In doing so, the Chicanx rasquache expresses a nonlinear relationality in their aesthetic practice that subverts inferiorizing messages and hierarchical values.

The aesthetic sensibilities of *rasquache* and *domesticana* are socially orientated, from the "underdog" perspective, and directed at maintaining connectivity with others beyond the subject/object dichotomy and linear conceptions of time. The practice involves a community history, expressed as a lived and creative social experience generated with others who are outside of dominant spaces. As Hernandez's *La Quinceañera* series shows, the *domesticana* can articulate the complexities of traditions, community practices, gendered roles, and the social conditions that give rise to critical re-valuing. The following discussion of Mesa-Bain's altar will show how the aesthetic sensibility creates an affirmative representation of self through a collective familial world of many generations that counter dominant narratives of Chicanx peoples. The *rasquache domesticana* engages in practices of remembering to assemble a relationality with other women, both familial and culturally linked, that deepens possibilities

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to establish wide networks of relations. While the epistemological, aesthetic, and social dimensions of *rasquache* have been made clear, in the next section, I will elaborate on *domesticana* altar art and begin to interrelate the aesthetic with spirituality.

2 From the Altar: Aesthetics and Spiritual Relations

Altar-making practices have long histories in Mesoamerica, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, among other regions around the world, to establish relations between human and spiritual beings.[13] Chicanx peoples take up altar practices informed by many peoples of the aforementioned regions as well as the social and historical circumstances that affect Chicanx communities.[14] Altar aesthetics, as manifested in art works by Mesa-Bains, Ofelia Esparza, Consuelo Flores, and Celia Herrera Rodriguez, among other Chicanx artists, hold a space to critically engage a cross-cultural consciousness that reframes socialities and honors people who are neglected, overlooked, and often disempowered. In altar spaces, Chicanx artists using *domesticana* enact complex relations with spirits to bolster potential for social (Pérez 2007: 92). This section elaborates on the *domesticana* aesthetic to flesh out the connections to spirituality. I focus on the second chapter of Mesa-Bain's *Venus Envy* project, a three-part altar installation series documenting her personal and collective experience as a Chicana feminist.[15] I analyze how Mesa-Bains employs the *domesticana* sensibility through a discussion of an aesthetic that accumulates and memory work. I show that these two artistic techniques facilitate a spiritual relation with others across histories that is integral to Mesa-Bains' aesthetic resistance.

The retrospective series examines three characters, the nun, the bride, and virgin, intertwining cultural and historical elements to re-vision their lives. Mesa-Bains reinterprets Catholic and cultural meanings attached to women's "traditional" roles to re-fashion personal self and collective selfhood. The artist creates a space that can invoke a Catholic sacramental ritual, a Catholic nun of the eighteenth century, and Nahua mythology. The first installation, *Venus Envy Chapter I: (of the First Holy Communion Moments Before the End)* (1993, revised 2022), is a vanity table displaying family portraits, Mary-Mother Jesus figures, flowers, and the image of a Nahua deity, *Coatlicue*. The second part, *Venus Envy Chapter II: The Library of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (1994/revised 2021), exhibits a table filled with items that could have been on a desk belonging to the Catholic nun of colonial Mexico. The third chapter*, Cihuatlampa: The Place of the Giant Women* (1997), displays a large golden gown surrounded by figurines of women and Nahua iconography, meant to represent gigantic powerful women of indigenous populations. In each of these installations, displayed at different sites, Mesa-Bains reconceives cultural gender norms, as well as spatial and temporal dynamics related to Chicanx epistemologies and social relations.

The second chapter of the installation reimagines the scientific laboratory of Sor Juana, whom Mesa-Bains describes as the first feminist in the "New World" (Durón 2018).[16] Sor Juana was notoriously critical of the Catholic Church's inferiorization of women and the restrictions that confined them to the home or the Church.[17] Exhibited at the William College Museum of Art, *The Library of Sor Juana* is a laboratory, enclosed in a reading room, with a skull, many globes, surgical instruments, books, beakers, papers, and photographs placed throughout a large wooden desk. The artist juxtaposes the religious and scientific meanings of knowledge and centers Sor Juana, a nun in the eighteenth century limited by gendered spaces and hierarchical roles. Feminist scholar Maria P. Chaves Daza explains,

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> Sor Juana learned to read in secret because schooling was not afforded to women at the time. By the same token, *what* she learned to read was the bible and the texts of the natural sciences brought by the Spanish colonizers; what was recognized as “real knowledge” (Chaves Daza 2021: 114).

However, Sor Juana contested the dominating knowledge systems by writing poems in Nahuatl, a language suppressed due to Spanish colonialism, and she argued for women’s intellectual rights. The nun and writer instigated the dominative and exclusionary dynamics of the Catholic Church, and as such, it comes as no surprise that her books were taken away and she was “silenced” (Chaves Daza 2021:114).

The “objects” deliberately placed upon the desk altar are an accumulation of various everyday “objects” that Sor Juana likely had access to as a religious and scientific scholar. Mesa-Bains assembles the materials together in innovative ways from the ordinariness captured in *rasquache*. She describes accumulation of aesthetic practices on the home altar:

> Women who exercise a familial aesthetic create arrangements of bric-a-brac, memorabilia, devotional icons, and decorative elements. Certain formal and continuing elements include saints, flowers (natural and synthetic), family photos, mementos, historic items (military medals, flags, etc.), candles, and offerings. Characterized by accumulation, display, and abundance, the altars allow a comingling of history, faith, and the personal (Mesa-Bains 1999: 93).

The sensibility of the *domesticana rasquache* utilizes an aesthetic of accumulation of the ordinary and creates a decorative assemblage in relation to various facets of one’s identity and collective relations.[18] The altar space enables altarists to hold together various items meant to pay homage to those they envision as part of their network of relations.[19] In this regard, Mesa-Bains affirms her genealogy with the *Criollo* nun through an altar of seemingly ordinary items representing Sor Juana’s tools of resistance to dominant standards of knowledge and gendered roles.

In addition to the assemblage characteristic of Mesa-Bains’ altar installations, the altars operate as an ephemeral site of memory work. As a part of a memory-making process, altar-making and altar spaces tie together various generations of ancestors represented on the altar.[20] Highlighting other women and including them in a genealogical history supports the artist’s efforts to counter dominant histories that overlook women and their contributions. This type of remembering can be described as a form of retrofitted memory. Historian Maylei Blackwell and author of *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* theorizes retrofitted memory as a

> form of counter-memory that uses fragments of older histories that have been disjunctured by colonial practices of organizing historical knowledge or by masculinist renderings of history that disappear women's political involvement in order to create a space for women in history that erase them (Blackwell 2011: 2).

As such, remembering in this way is a subversive practice that re-fashions dominant narratives and creates or sustains genealogies of resistance (Blackwell 2011: 102).

Blackwell’s analysis of memory practices is helpful for understanding the memory work involved in Mesa-Bains’ altar aesthetic.[21] Thinking of Mesa-Bains’ altar as invoking a remembering that contests

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how Chicanx people have been silenced helps to articulate an aesthetic approach to how certain histories, knowledge, and bodies have been disregarded. For instance, in the "domestic chambers of paradise," the Chicanx struggle against religious institutional practices that invisibilize women and people who resist gender binaries. It is on the altar that Mesa-Bains affirms Sor Juana and the scholarly and religious contributions she made that challenge colonial gender norms that limit women's lives. This practice, coupled with the fact that Mesa-Bains uses altar installations to re-envision self and others, supports a remembering that strengthens genealogical lineages with others resisting oppressive social and political norms. This is to say that for marginalized peoples and those forgotten or invisibilized by dominant society, employing a counter-memory practice facilitates an active re-organization of relations (Delgadillo 2011: 136).[22]

Moreover, the altar process invokes an alternative social dynamic that dissolves purist categorizations that separate the material and immaterial. The altar as a material site is dedicated to hosting immaterial spirits and supports the altar maker's efforts to establish communal relations. The shared sensibility of the altar aesthetic involves an ethical practice between two (or more) members with common relations, activating a type of relationality that shares power. Of this power dynamic, altar theorist Kay Turner writes, "The altar is a model of shared power between the human and divine, but it is also an instrument for achieving the actual distribution and exchange of power between the human and the divine" (Turner 2008: 193).[23] The transference at the altar is one of mutuality and reciprocity. The *domesticana* altarist sustains relations between themselves and their spirit beings while moving beyond established boundaries and dichotomous norms.

The altar dynamic between the artist and the spirit emphasizes an ethical practice that gives and (potentially) receives. Through an *ofrenda,* or offering, items placed on the altar are gifts to a spiritually invoked being. In Mesa-Bains' altar for Sor Juana, the artist erects a structure composed of objects that represent the ordinary of the nun's life. The pens, papers, and books displayed on the desk recall the items Sor Juana's used to create poems and letters that expressed a feminist philosophy, her lived reality, and her dissent from dominant patriarchal views sustained by male Catholic clergy. By honoring Sor Juana and including her as an ancestor within her network of resistance, Mesa-Bains calls on the spirit to sustain her dissent against gender norms that inferiorize Chicanx. The "give and receive" ethical commitment requires both beings to participate, without enacting a hierarchy of relation. A mutuality is expressed through the altar.

Through the use of memory work and an aesthetic of accumulation, Mesa-Bains activates a type of sensibility that treats spirits as potential accomplices in disrupting dominating logics and aesthetic standards. *Sor Juana's Library* reveals how the *rasquache domesticana* sensibility interprets ordinary objects as carrying spiritual vitality that can create new meanings, and sustain relations between a Chicana artist and a nun of colonial Mexico. The spiritual conjuring is possible through an aesthetic that imagines shared relations beyond the binaries and invokes a multi-dimensional sensibility capable of mediating seemingly oppositional forces such as the spiritual/material, the living/dead, the subject/object, and individual/communal. While Mesa-Bains uses altar spaces to honor her lineages of resistance, establishing spiritual relations is vital to many Chicanx peoples who are refusing dichotomous aesthetic norms. In the next section, I elaborate on the aesthetic practices of making spirit through a discussion of Anzaldúa's artistic sensibilities. Focusing primarily on Anzaldúa as an artist, not solely as a theorist, I analyze her defiance of social separations between materiality and spirituality through her writing process.

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3 From the Ink of the Pen: Writing to Maintain Spiritual Relations

In *Borderlands* (1987), Anzaldúa guides readers through her writing process, one that is deeply connected to Nahua indigenous epistemology, aesthetic, and social relations.[24] For instance, the title of the sixth chapter, "*Tlillli, Tlapalli*/ The Path of the Red and the Black Ink," refers to the colors painted on Nahua codices, symbolizing wisdom and writing (Anzaldúa 1987: 91). In this section, I discuss in *xóchitl,* in *cuícatl* (flower and song), invoking art, and memory work practices. Anzaldúa's reference to in *xóchitl* in *cuícatl* indicates an aesthetic sensibility and practice that is not art for art's sake. Instead, framing the writing as an aesthetic process of flower and song, the philosopher identifies the relevant sensibilities and practices that are dedicated to an interconnected network of social relations. Philosopher James Maffie explains the Nahua phrase in *xóchitl* in *cuícatl* is a dynamic aesthetic process which the artist enacts to bring forth cosmic energies in their artwork.[25] By identifying with Nahua knowledge systems and social relations, Anzaldúa rejects dichotomous logics and abstract principles that often appear in Euro-Anglo aesthetics. Her writing process builds with knowledges that have been suppressed and inferiorized from colonial and imperialist domination, a point I later return to.

The next practice of invoking art elaborates on the relational sensibilities relevant to Anzaldúa's writing and connects us to the artist's spiritual sense. Anzaldúa asserts that invoked art is communal and quotidian. Anzaldúa engages Nahua interconnected dynamics to create with "objects" and invoke powers of the universe. Distinct from 'art for art's sake' that is housed in museums, invoked art is enacted in performance.[26] Anzaldúa writes of the invoked art experience:

> I see barely contained color threatening to spill over the boundaries of the object it represents and into other "objects" and over the borders of the frame I see a hybridization of metaphor, different species of ideas popping up here, popping up there, full of variation and seeming contradictions though I believe in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit (Anzaldúa 1987: 88).

As she performs her writing, Anzaldúa senses meanings and relations in tension and blurring borders. Invoking her art, Anzaldúa reasserts an interactive spiritual relationship between the subject/object and contradictions/order. The process of writing is collaborative because the object "thingified" is animated, similarly to the *rasquache* aesthetic, and conjures responses from the artist. Rivera and Hajovsky explain that "'invoked art' is not autonomous or geared toward psychological or emotional control. In fact, it is never just by itself in the sense that it is embedded within cosmic relations of reciprocity that are not at its disposal" (Rivera and Hajovsky 2020: 249).[27] The dynamic between Anzaldúa's writing, that is the creative process of the ink, paper, her ideas, and animated "objects," sustains a spiritual connection that transforms boundaries. Anzaldúa invokes the spirit in the aesthetic of writing and in doing so recognizes interrelated phenomena such as herself and all "things" of the cosmos.[28]

In the invoked art experience, Anzaldúa operates from a multidimensional aesthetic that does not split knowledge from spirit work or activism.[29] For example, in *Luz en lo Oscuro,* the relationship is described through a tense and creative aesthetic activity that continues to employ a cosmic relation, inspire the gods, and maintain reciprocity with the universe. Anzaldúa writes that "through creative engagements,

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you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the plane, with the struggles of the Earth itself" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015: 119). Through a relationship with the non-human energies and beings, Anzaldúa identifies their hardships as part of her own. By enacting creative acts such as writing poetry or prose, the stories facilitate Anzaldúa's spirit work, in which struggle and transformation are part of a cosmic relation with the earth, the gods, and other entities. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa describes that the aesthetic intention,

> when invoked in rite, the object/event is 'present;' that is, 'enacted,' it is both a physical thing and the power that infuses it. It is metaphysical in that it 'spins its energies between gods and humans' and its task is to move the gods (Anzaldúa 1987: 89).

The aesthetic work she performs is directed towards mediating the universe and its energies, thereby maintaining an interconnected reciprocal dynamic between the immaterial and material.

Anzaldúa invokes a spiritual activism that simultaneously performs alternative sensibilities to dichotomous aesthetic norms and establishes a relationality with others who are disregarded and devalued. Chicanx aesthetician Laura E. Pérez terms resistant spiritualities like Anzaldúa's as a politicized spirituality. In her 2007 book, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities,* Pérez explains spiritualities are politicized by Chicana feminists who draw on multiple lineages, including African, Nahua, Maya, and Lakota, to express an aesthetic that resists heteronormative gendering and racializing ideologies. She argues that the epistemological dimensions intertwined in spiritualities inform a sense of knowing that involves everyday relations such as familial, spiritual, and lived experiences as racialized, sexualized, and gendered persons. By suggesting a politicizing spirituality in aesthetic practice, Pérez theorizes a type of resistant relationality that is mediated through supposed oppositional dynamics between the material/immaterial and political/personal.[30]

Anzaldúa utilizes a complex memory practice that supports an intermediating process that can recognize the importance of contesting dominant narratives and extending her spirit work. Anzaldúa's counter-memory challenges the displacement of indigenous peoples and the ways in which their knowledge systems have been de-legitimized by colonial and modern systems of power. Re-envisioning dominant narratives or employing a retrofitted memory strategy in her writing practice, Anzaldúa performs important shifts,

> out of habitual formations, from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes (Anzaldúa 1987: 101).

The shifts are an intersubjective process in which Anzaldúa writes from various lineages that include Nahua peoples, her family, and communities along the U.S./Mexico Rio Grande Valley borderland. Like *rasquache domesticana*, in Anzaldúa's non-linear memory practice, multiple sensibilities are interconnected with others in the margins who are devalued and disregarded rather than divided.

Scholar Theresa Delgadillo asserts that Anzaldúa's theorization from memory includes personal, familiar stories as well as counter-memory. Through the practice of writing and evoking the collective dimensions of memory, Delgadillo contends that:

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> In offering her memories and those of family and friends as testimony to the history and experience of the U.S.-Mexico border, Anzaldúa makes the border inhabitants not merely informants but knowledgeable subjects—a critical shift in status. Moreover, as knowledge subjects, they are engaged in making community out of their cultural inheritances (Delgadillo 2011: 22).

Anzaldúa re-creates dominant histories about the people of the borderlands and treats herself and them as sources of knowledge. Philosopher Andrea Pitts explains that these constructions, or rather re-constructions, are "our collaborative interactions with others, including their distinct, materially rich histories and enacted practices of meaning-making, that frame and shape our understanding of the boundaries of selves and others" (Pitts 2021: 37).[31] Thus, by using a counter-memory making practice in an aesthetic of writing, Anzaldúa honors other border dwellers as co-creators of history and collective meaning.

Anzaldúa's writing, like Mesa-Bains' altar-making, performs memory work to engender spiritual relations with ancestors, both familial and non-familial. The counter-memory practice she takes up makes it possible to envision alternative relations that affirm marginalized knowledges and a cosmic social sense. The aesthetic process, distinct from conceptual artistry, maintains a close engagement with the social contexts and histories that shape the communities of Chicanx peoples. The writer's ability and social position to establish relations with others of marginalized positions is a key dimension of the Chicanx spiritual relationships that can be sustained across various spaces, worlds, and communities. This requires re-envisioning material and immaterial dynamics, as well as subject and object relations, in ways that do not reassert hierarchical categories and status, as Anzaldua's aesthetic process shows.

4 Conclusion

As part of a relational sensibility, spirituality interpreted by Chicanx aestheticians creates a distinct social aesthetic that is historically engaged and embodied. Chicana theologian Lara Medina explains many Chicanx "follow in the footsteps of our foremothers to provide spiritual nourishment for themselves and their communities" (Medina 2008: 224).[32] The sensibilities are those that can be cultivated within interpersonal relations. Like the *rasquache* aesthetic taken up by Ybarra-Frausto and Mesa-Bains, resistant spiritualities invoke a deviant sense that is enacted in their movements in the world and aesthetic expressions. Spirituality, conceived as a material, social, and political presence, is invoked in altars to connect with others who have been marginalized and disembodied by the violence and norms of coloniality. For Anzaldúa, engaging a defiant and non-hierarchical social aesthetic in her writing enables transformative possibilities and spiritual relations with other beings that are otherwise invisibilized by dominant social dichotomies. Anzaldúa and Mesa-Bains counter dominant separatist logics of immaterial/material, individual/community, and enact community through interdependent and reciprocal relations. These scholars initiate an aesthetic sensibility that resists through spirituality, processes of remembering, and communal relations. The sensibilities performed are movements that chisel meanings from numerous historical and social processes. In doing so, the marginalized are not forgotten or invisibilized; rather, they are remembered, honored, and nourished.

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This paper has addressed the shortage of theorization of spirituality as it is tied to resistance and responds with an offering of the substantial resources in Chicanx aesthetics and an analysis of spirituality in communal practices of resistance. Through a discussion of Chicanx aesthetic sensibilities and practices, such as altar-making and writing, I have shown that Chicanx aesthetic is promoted as part of an interconnected spirituality. The altarist enacts a generative aesthetic in which they can maintain communality with other invisibilized persons based on ethical offerings that assert reciprocity. Recalling Anzaldúa's writing practice, it is her embodied activity that engages a psycho-spiritual experience with Nahua cosmic relations to reposition marginalized persons and spiritual beings as collaborators. In my view, these Chicanx aesthetic practices rely on spirituality in the every day and in practice. As such, I close with a re-assertion of the significance of the interconnected relationship of spirituality, especially as it informs community practices of social transformation, and insist that it requires greater attention and study of how it is enacted in deviant aesthetics.

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[1] The term Chicanx, referring to Mexican-American people, has been taken up in recent years to challenge hierarchical gender binaries in the Spanish language. I use the term in this paper to refer to Chicano, Chicana, Chican@ (taken up mainly in the digital era 90s, and early 2000s), and Chicanx people. For discussions on the debate of 'x' in Latinx and Ch/Xicana scholarship, see Stephanie Rivera Berruz, "Latin American and Latin Feminisms," *Latin American and Latinx Philosophy: A Collaborative Introduction*, ed. Robert Eli Sanchez, Jr., (New York: Routledge, 2020), 161-79; Andrea J. Pitts "Latinx Philosophy," in *Latin American and Latinx Philosophy: A Collaborative Introduction*, ed. Robert Eli Sanchez, Jr., (New York: Routledge, 2020), 220-41. Also see Maylei Blackwell for historical analysis in *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas, 2011); Miroslava Chavez-Garcia, "A Genealogy of Chicana history, the Chicana Movement, and Chicana Studies," in *Routledge Handbook of Chicana/o Studies*, ed. Francisco A Lomeli, Denise A. Segura, and Elyette Benjamin-Labarthe (New York: Routledge, 2019), 67-80.

[2] For further discussion of the critiques of the underrepresentation of the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of resistance see Laura E. Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Rafael Vizcaíno, "Secular Decolonial Woes," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2021): 71–92 (URL: https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.35.1.0071; last accessed on May 30, 2023); Lara Medina, "Nepantla Spirituality," in *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women's Lives*, ed. Elisa Facio and Irene Lara (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2014), 167–86.

[3] Mesa-Bains and Anzaldúa are theorists and artists.
Amalia Mesa-Bains (1943) was born in Santa Clara, California (US). She is a Chicana visual artist, curator, and writer best known for her aesthetic theory, *rasquache domesticana,* and altar art installations. Her work engages memory, spirituality, cultural traditions and practices, and gender hierarchies related to Chicanx lived experiences. Her publications include *Ceremony of Memory: Contemporary Hispanic Spiritual*

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and Ceremonial Art (1988) and H*omegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism (2006),* a co-edited book with bell hooks. As an altar artist, Mesa-Bains drew inspiration from community altar installations displayed during Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) commemorations by Chicanx communities in the 1970s and 1980s of Northern California. Some of her altar installations are dedicated to Mexican cultural icons Frida Kahlo (1975), and Dolores del Río (1984, revised 1991), as well as Catholic nuns Santa Teresa de Ávila (1984), and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1994/, revised 2021).

Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) was born in Harlingen, Texas (US). Anzaldúa was a queer Chicana feminist and writer from the US-Texas/Mexico borderlands. Her scholarship covers various social, aesthetic, cultural, and political themes such as political borders, cultural identity, linguistic terrorism, land disenfranchisement, spirituality, and queer identity, among others. Her most influential works are *Borderlands/La Frontera (1987), Luz en lo Oscuro/Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, and Reality,* edited by Analouise Keating (2015)*, This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981)*,* a co-edited anthology. These publications have contributed to discourses in Chicanx Studies, Women and Genders Studies, Queer Studies, Borderlands theory, and Disabilities Studies.

4 See Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo," (1989) reprinted in *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology*. ed. Jennifer A. González, Terecita Romo, Chon A. Noriega, and C. Ondine Chavoya (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 85-90.

5 Chicano Movement refers to a civil rights period of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States that includes Chicano, Chicana, and Chicanx people who contributed to the development of Chicanx aesthetic sensibilities described in this paper. For further elaboration on these genealogies see Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art: Inside/Outside the Master's House* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Blackwell 2011; Marc Simon Rodriguez, *Rethinking the Chicano Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 2015).

6 For further discussion of the multiple lineages see Pérez (2007: 8-9); Blackwell (2011: 14-9); González (2019: 3); Moraga and Anzaldúa (2021).

7 Nancy Tuana and Charles Scott, "Border Arte Philosophy: Altogether Beyond Philosophy," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 32, no. 1, (2018): 70-91 (URL: doi:10.5325/jspecphil.32.1.0070; last accessed on May 30, 2023).

8 I follow Anzaldúa's use of quotation marks around "objects" to indicate a perception of an inanimate object that does not adhere to rigid categorization and separation between a subject and object. See Anzaldúa (1987: 88).

9 For an example see Bob Eckert's photography series, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, specifically the image of John Lea's hood of his pickup truck painted with the image of Guadalupe (URL: https://www.bobeckertphotography.com/lady-of-guadalupe.html; last accessed on May 30, 2023).

10 Texas based artist, Mari Hernandez, is a self-portrait photographer who uses visual images to re-interpret histories and dominant cultural narratives surrounding beauty in Mexican and Chicana contexts. See *La Quinceañera* series: https://www.marihernandez.com/quinceantildeera.html; last accessed on May 30, 2023).

11 The term *quinceañera* is used in two ways, depending on the context, to refer to the celebratory event, and the celebrant herself.

12 For further discussion of quinceañeras, beauty culture, and consumer practices, see Rachel Valentina González, *Quinceañera Style: Social Belonging and Latinx Consumer Identities* (Austin, University of Texas Press: 2019). Also see Delphine Blast's series *Quinceañera*, which captures photos and brief bios of celebrants in South America: http://www.delphineblast.com/en/gallery/13/Quinceanera ; (last accessed on May 30, 2023).

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[13] Lara Medina, "Creating Space" in *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*, ed. Lara Medina and Martha R. Gonzales (Tucson, The University of Arizona Press: 2019), 37-9.

[14] ed. Elisa Facio and Irene Lara, *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women's Lives* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2014); Lara Medina and Martha R. Gonzales, *Voices From the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices* (Tucson, The University of Arizona Press: 2019); Maria P. Chaves Daza, "An Offering on the Altar of Queer History: Amalia Mesa-Bains and Sor Juana's Library," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 19 (2021): 107-18; URL: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1209&context=jfs; (last accessed on May 30, 2023).

[15] To see chapters one and two of *Venus Envy,* visit the artist's webpage: https://amaliamesabains.com/exhibits/; last accessed on May 30, 2023).

[16] The news article includes personal quotes from Mesa-Bains and images of her altar art, including a black and white image of Sor Juana's library. Mamimilíano Durón, "How to Altar the World: Amalia Mesa-Bains's Art Shifts the Way We See Art History," *ARTnews,* 27 March 2018, https://www.artnews.com/artnews/news/icons-amalia-mesa-bains-9988/; last accessed on May 30, 2023).

[17] See Chaves Daza (2021: 113-14); Rivera Berruz (2020: 163-65).

[18] Chaves Daza explains that accumulation on the altar "builds upon what is has depending on the current need or celebration. The task of tending to the altar is always in conversation with the environment; the caretaker acts depending on the occasion and needs of the community" (Chaves Daza 2021: 115). This is to say there is flexibility to the meanings of the "objects" that are relation to the artist and the community.

[19] See Pérez (2007: 101); Ramón A. Gutiérrez, "Conjuring the Holy: Mexican Domestic Altars" in *Home Altars of Mexico,* ed. Dana Salvo and Ramón A. Gutiérrez (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press: 1997), 37-49.

[20] Altars are not only dedicated to ancestors or for the dead. For instance, Mariana Ortega discusses of altars for the living that rely on an aesthetic memory as part of a "spontaneous memorialization" to honor those who have been invisibilized as humans but hypervisibilized as "criminals" and "illegals." Mariana Ortega, "Altars for the Living" Shadow Ground, Aesthetic Memory, and the US-Mexico Borderlands," in *Thinking the US South: Contemporary Philosophy from Southern Perspectives,* ed. Shannon Sullivan (Northwestern University Press, 2021), 113-32, (URL: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1f884f2.10; last accessed on May 30, 2023).

[21] Blackwell connects the process of recreating with the discarded to retrofitting memory processes, which I find is a key element of *rasquache.*

[22] For more examples of the use of counter-memory practices in memoir, novel and documentaries, see Theresa Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[23] Kay Turner, "Voces De Fe," in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, ed. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[24] There are debates that draw careful attention to Anzaldúa's use of indigeneity in her writings. While I do not discuss them in this paper, they are important discussions that relate to content of this paper, particularly the lineages that inform Anzaldúa's aesthetic practice. For examples of criticisms that argue Anzaldúa romanticized indigenous cultures and histories, see María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, "Who is the Indian in Aztlan? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, Chicanismo from Lacandón," in *The Latin American Studies Reader,* ed. Illeana Rodriguez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) 402-23; Yvonne Yarbro-Bejaron, "Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*: Cultural Studies, "Difference," and the

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Non-Unitary Subject," *Cultural Critique,* no. 28 (1994), 5-28. For a response to Saldaña-Portillo, see Pitts (2022: 123-60). For a response to Yarbro-Bejaron, see Delgadillo (2011: 1-38).

25 James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014), 39.

26 For further discussion of museum spaces and mainstream art practices, see "Border Arte: Nepantla, el lugar de la frontera" in *Luz en lo Oscuro/Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, and Reality* (Durham*:* Duke University Press, 2015), 47-64.

27 Omar Rivera and Patrick Hajovsky, "Visual Epistemologies of Resistance: Imaging Virgins and Saints in Contemporary Cusco," *Revista De Estudios Globales y Arte Contemporáneo* 7, no. 1, (2020): 237–66.

28 Elsewhere I analyze the cosmic relational dynamic of Anzaldua's writing process through a focus on embodied sensibility, in relation to Maria Lugones decolonial feminism and aesthesis. See Denise Meda Calderon, "Cosmologies, Ritual, and Resistance: An Exploration of María Lugones' Decolonial Aesthesis and Coalitional *Movidas*," *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* 13, 1, (2022), 119-39 (URL: https://ijp.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/9-Denise-Meda-Calderon.pdf; last accessed on May 30, 2023).

29 Anzaldúa's spiritual activism was an embodied activism grounded in the everyday realities of people struggling against multiple oppressions such as racial, gender, and economic inequalities. For further discussion of Anzaldúa's spirit work (and its distinctions from New Age movements), see Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift…the path of concimiento… inner work, public acts," in *This Bridge We Call Home*, ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 540-78; Analouise Keating, "I'm a Citizen of the Universe: Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," *Journal of Feminist Studies*, nos. 1/2 (2008), 53-69; Christopher D. Tirres, "Spiritual Activism and Praxis: Gloria Anzaldúa's Mature Spirituality," *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* 10, Issue 1, (2019): 1-22.

30 Pérez theorizes a hybrid form of spirituality. This is a conceptual view also taken up by Anzaldúa, Delgadillo and Medina. Sometimes Anzaldúa referred to "spiritual activism" related to an interconnected awareness and social change, while other times used "spiritual mestizaje" of different spiritual practices. See: *This Bridge We Call Home*, 572 and in *Interviews/Entrevistas,* ed. Anzaldúa and Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 178, and Anzaldúa and Keating (2015: 39) respectively. Building with Anzaldúa, Delgadillo theorizes "spiritual mestizaje" (2011), and Medina uses the term "nepantla spirituality" (2014), to theorize a similar hybrid and middling way.

31 Andrea J. Pitts, *Nos/Otras: Gloria E. Anzaldua, Multiplicitous Agency, and Resistance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 37.

32 Lara Medina, "Los Espiritus Siguen Hablando: Chicana Spiritualities," in *Latina/o Healing Practices: Mestizo and Indigenous Perspectives*" (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2008) 223-48.

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