'Too bad mihijita was morena': Anzaldúa's autobiographical encounters with her mother

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> Chicana identity is borderland identity, a continual process of negotiating multiplicity and contradictions, just as autobiography is a borderland genre, constantly negotiating position and parameters of genre. (Zamora Lausch 2003: 20)

1. Chicanas' autobiographical texts in the last two decades of the Twentieth Century

Chicana autobiography is not a solid identifiable genre as such, where all literary works share at least the cannonical first person narrator who presents the writer's life within a chronological timeline in prose. The creative flexibility with which Chicana writers have approached the written articulation of their lives is probably the only commonground for their autobiographical works. The inclusion of poetry, photographs, fictionalised memories, cooking recipes, other people's stories, and pieces of artistic material together with Chicanas' life narrations became more and more frequent during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Besides, "they undermine linguistic norms by using a mixture of English, Spanish and Spanglish" (Torres 1998: 276), adding another specific feature for their collective construction as a genre.

In this essay I intend to contextualize the innovative arena that Chicana autobiography brought to the last two decades of the twentieth century and

Gloria Anzaldúa's autobiographical production in particular. Having a framework for the Chicana autobiographical genre will be a pathway for the analysis of Anzaldúa's relationship with her mother in her work as well as her search for a new mother figure that fulfills the voids and restores the damage left by their interaction. Anzaldúa broke the secrecy of her various conflicts with her mother, helping us to understand the family and gender roots of her identity.

During the 1980s Chicanas' autobiographical texts were predominant amongst their literary works in the United States. Experimentation with the form of life writing became a space of freedom to be explored by several Chicana writers such as Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Norma Cantú, Cherríe Moraga, Sheila and Sandra Ortiz-Taylor, amongst others. In all cases the borders of cannonized autobiography were being challenged and transgressed in the same manner that their own lives had also been daring journeys into the redefinition of their cultural and sexual identities.[1] The elements frequently shared by Chicana writers are directly connected with codeswitching as both English and Spanish are often combined in their texts; multiple subjectivity as a form of breaking and repositioning the first person voice, as Zamora Lausch (2003: 19) states: "Notions of the 'I' split when that 'I' is an individual who asserts multiple subjectivity, when that individual is marginalized, and much more so when that marginalization is multiplied by gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation". Gender and cultural self-affirmation which reverberates in the collective identity is also present in these Chicana autobiographies which often inform the reader of customs, forms of cooking and eating, Mexican traditions that survive in the U.S., and ancient forms of healing (such as with a "curandera"). Writing Chicanas' lives is rooted in their individual story but there is also a political commitment with the community. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Norma Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, Cherríe Moraga's *Love in the War Years* are all examples of Chicana texts with an important autobiographical content where all these elements combine in various manners contributing to the creative fluidity that characterizes autobiography.

In the case of Norma Elia Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1997) the author combines the protagonist's narration of her life with several black and white pictures of herself and of a number of members of her family. Cantú plays with the world of the imagined and the real, expanding the borders of "truth" which is so much part of the autobiographical debate and exploring the ethnographic content of her family life. Not in vain did she coin it as "a fictional autoethnography". *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*

1. For years Gloria E. Anzaldúa as well as Norma E. Cantú worked very hard to transgress their working-class family circumstances to pursue their dreams of becoming writers and academics.

(2001) is the result of a group of Latinas who met for seven years before they gathered these *testimonios* and personal stories together. In it Cantú includes autobiographical essays, together with other diverse Latina women's autobiographical stories. Sandra and Sheila Ortiz Taylor's book *Imaginary Parents: A Family Autobiography* (1996) combines their respective skills as a writer and artist to elaborate an autobiographical perception of their parents. Sandra offers 3D collages which represent her experience of her parents whereas Sheila recreates the family life experiences in a string of vignettes which can be read as film clips. The sisters' individual family experience is the subject of exploration, away from their own individuality, once again multiple subjectivity as opposed to the individual writing about his or her own life.

As a commonground to all these works, the articulation of the concept of border becomes more complicated when the different cultures in which Chicana literature is rooted intervene: the Aztec, the Mexican, the Spanish and the Anglo American (these last two with their respective influences):

> […] these autobiographies break away from normative language structures by implementing a very critical aspect of their culture by mixing Spanish and English. Some stories are non-chronological and break any sequence of time, unlike Euro-centric autobiography. Women of color have demonstrated through their work how fragmented their lives can become and as a result their literary production reflects this reality. Many combine biographical details, myth, fiction, and pieces of fantasy. Moreover, the lay-out of the narratives are composed of vignettes, essays, sketches, photo-albums, poems, short-stories, plays and diary entries. All these elements give life to the identity and voice of women of color and the array of styles are a subversive production to mainstream autobiography. (Flores 1999: 6)

Chicanas' autobiographical writing in the 1980s was articulated within a context of change and construction of images of self-value for women. The power of self-steem, women's financial and social independence, and the importance of personal experiences perceived as a source of learning and inspiration, were factors conducive to feminist autobiographical creations. Chicanas wanted to break the silence, which had been a permanent part of their history, and dared to speak of their desires, their origins and their courage in their autobiographical works. In doing so, they could set free old repressed feelings and be united with other women who had struggled through similar experiences. Besides, they could start being a real part of the American literary world in which they had always been invisible. Through their literary presence their existence in the country improved in importance, they travelled the long way from repressed silence to active assertiveness.

The 1990s meant a continuation from the 80s into a literary world that now existed where Chicana writers had a voice and were no longer invisible. The areas of study start to move away from autobiography into more academic writing. The awareness of Chicana feminism has increased and Chicanas themselves analyse their works using their own literary criticism.

The issues that Chicanas worked on during the 1990s range, according to Rebolledo and Rivero (1995: 25), "from taboo issues of sexuality to identity, to a coming of consciousness, to reflection on gender and ethnicity". These are all areas which had already started to be dealt with in the 1980s but which are still very relevant in the 90s for the definition of Chicanas. In 1993 *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race and Gender* is published, edited by Teresa Córdova and a committee formed by members of NACCS.[2] The essays in this volume include amongst the main issues: politics and work conflicts, historiography, language and literature.

In the same year a group of researchers from MALCS[3] published *Chicana Critical Issues* (both in English and Spanish). In the introduction they define themselves as a group who shares many lived experiences (as socially and politically-committed working-class Chicanas). It is particularly important to emphasise this group's social and interdisciplinary dimension as their work within the Chicana community is not only limited to the space of intellectual thinking but it connects with Chicanas' needs and problems.

On the other hand, the Chicanas of the 1990s will look into their sexuality through the analysis of tradition, society and female myths such as *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, *la Malinche,* and *La Llorona*.[4] Various are the Chicana writers who

2. NACCS stands for the "National Association for Chicano and Chicana Studies" which organises an annual conference since 1976 in which several research works are presented on issues connected with Chicana and Chicano literature and culture.

3. MALCS stands for "Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social" from the University of California, Davis, since 1983.

4. The figure of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* stands as a mythical representation of motherhood within the Chicano community. She embodies all goodness and positive forces. She is not God but intercedes for all Chicanos/as who come searching for her help. She is a powerful reference for Chicana motherhood, becoming untouchable and unreachable for human beings. *La Malinche* stands as another cultural mother for Chicanos/as but is generally seen as a *vendida* or traitor as she was Hernán Cortés' translator and lover and bore the "first" *mestizo* child. Feminist writers and critics have revised her figure as a powerful cultural translator and a woman who was sold by her family into slavery to be at Cortés' service. In the case of *La Llorona*, her story is part of a legend which changes depending on the part of Mexico or the United States where the story is told. She became desperate when her husband abandoned her and she drowned her children in the river. Her spirit hollers around rivers while searching for her dead children. Such destructive vision of the mother figure has been analysed and revised by Chicana feminist writers to question matters such as how the AngloAmerican patriarchal system has killed Chicanos/as' socio-cultural identity.

present a revision of Chicana female myths, offering new versions which adopt values with which they have not traditionally been associated such as strength and action (as opposed to passivity). In 1996 Ana Castillo edited *Goddess of the Americas* in which many Chicana writers (and some Chicanos too) revise the figure of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, the myth which has been so influential for the permanence of a model of a passive and submissive woman within the patriarchal system. We can affirm that the Chicanas writers of the 1990s "are women who are taking control of their lives and of their sexuality" (Rebolledo y Rivero 1993:28). These are mostly writers who have been strongly influenced by feminist ideas and who have followed the Chicanas' revolutionary steps started during the sixties. Some of them are also academics such as Norma Cantú, María Herrera-Sobek, Tey Diana Rebolledo, and Gloria Anzaldúa. They became aware of their gender models and fought to revise and reconstruct them as it was the case with *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. By revising the values transmitted by *La Virgen de Guadalupe,* in many cases they were analyzing their own mothers and grandmothers's gender models and deciding what they wanted to perpetuate and what to leave out of their lives. One example of a Chicana writer who questioned the passivity and silence the *Virgen* represented as a model for her life was Sandra Cisneros' "Guadalupe, the sex goddess" (1996: 46-51).[5]

Various are the ways to approach their own autobiographical material, here we have only mentioned some examples. As critic Rebecca J. Zamora Lausch (2003: 19-20) states when referring to the nature of contemporary Chicana autobiography:

> The very term "Chicana autobiography" is itself a realm of contest and contradiction, for, as is evident, the genre of autobiography is slippery, constantly shifting, and sometimes almost disappearing. Pairing autobiography with Chicana adds complexity, for "Chicana" brings with it reference to material experience as well as connotations of history, ethnicity, race, gender, politics, and also individual imaginaries.

I agree with Zamora Lausch on the almost 'obligatory' flexibility that the autobiographical genre has developed within the last two decades of the twentieth century, especially within the representation of ethnic and cultural minority women's life texts in the United States. The articulation of the individual female experience is loaded with the gender, racial and cultural conflicts generated by every Chicana's personal borderlands; yet, at the same time it is generating rich creative forms to suit each writer's demands of self-expression.

5. Many were the artists who painted the *Virgen de Guadalupe* in different active attitudes such as reading the newspaper, sewing in her machine (Yolanda López), or in a bikini as in Alma López's controversial "Lupe".

2. *Borderlands / La frontera*: Anzaldúa travels across the borders of identity

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa is widely known as an outstanding contemporary Chicana writer, brave critic, and social fighter. She is well-known for frequently mixing her personal life with her academic insights and theories. She is the perfect example of somebody who has transgressed the cannonical rules of academic writing and whose creativity in writing has impulsed the perception of life experience as fragmented in form and content.

In the case of Anzaldúa's masterpiece, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), many have been the academic attempts to classify it within the Western cannonical literary genres. *Borderlands/La Frontera* is at the same time a collection of academic essays, a book of poems, a historical account of Chicanos' past, and an autobiography. As Chicana critic Sonia Saldívar-Hull (1999: 3) states in the introduction to the second edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "the *Borderlands* genre continually refuses stasis. Shifting from Mexico-*tejana* History, to personal testimonial, the text moves restlessly onward to a history of a larger political family". The book is based on Anzaldúa's idea of the physical, the cultural and the psychological borders between Mexico and the United States primarily. She addresses her reality which is commonground to many other Chicanas who are permanent inhabitants of several borderlands. Anzaldúa (1987, preface) clearly presents this concept in the preface to the book: "the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy".

Anzaldúa dared to "break the silences" (Adams 1994: 137), giving voice to her own borderlands and making it possible for other Chicanas to try to understand theirs.[6] Digging in the community and the family life, while dealing with the socio-cultural AngloAmerican interferences, turns Anzaldúa's autobiographical basis of *Borderlands/La Frontera* into a profound search for self-knowledge. On the contrary, *Borderlands/La Frontera* emerges as a complex piece of work mingling poetry together with seven essays on cultural history of the Mexican and Indian peoples, all framed by what could be coined as a "gendered cultural autobiography". *Borderlands/La Frontera* does not follow Westernized chronological conventions of time and place. Her strength comes from the symbiosis between the confession of her experiences as a

6. Kate Adams uses this expression to refer to the daring work of Anzaldúa, Moraga and Marmon Silko. All three writers belong to ethnic and cultural minorities in the US and have broken the old silences.

Chicana lesbian and her claim of the presence of the Chicanos as a colonized people in the United States.

In the next sections I will explore the autobiographical relationship of Anzaldúa with her mother, whom she mentions several times throughout her work. Her feelings of shame, pain and fear are a significant border where Anzaldúa once again breaks the canonical limits of autobiography. Anzaldúa's confessions about her mother are scattered and correspond to various moments in her life. The relationship with mothers and grandmothers are present with more or less intensity in all the Chicanas' autobiographical works mentioned above. In the case of Anzaldúa, our looking into this intimate area of her personal world will help us to see the little girl's pain which influenced the rest of her literary life.

3. Gloria Anzaldúa and Her Relationship with Her Mother: a Significant Borderlands in Her Life

> "Yet, while she would try to correct my more aggressive moods, my mother was secretly proud of my 'waywardness'" (Anzaldúa 1983: 201)
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> "[...] being afraid that my friends would see my momma, would know that she was loud-her voice penetrated every corner". (Anzaldúa 1983: 201)

Through the reading of Anzaldúa's work and the passing of time I noticed that her relationship with her mother was not ever-present. However, when addressed, Amalia, her mother, seemed to be mostly both a disallowing as well as a suffering figure. Anzaldúa's words on her mother made me question what Amalia's influence had meant on her early childhood and adolescence and how she affected the development of Anzaldúa's later work as a writer. It seemed to me that it was Amalia's insistence on Anzaldúa being and behaving as a proper Texan *Chicanita* (obeying her at all times and following pre-assigned traditional gender roles) that pushed her even more powerfully towards a totally opposite behavioural direction, which she had chosen early in childhood anyway. This rebellious path in her life led the author towards the search of her own freedom as an independent Chicana who had her own political ideas as a Marxist and openly declared a forbidden sexual orientation as a lesbian. The road towards personal choices was one Amalia had not walked herself and, therefore, could not understand or support for many years.

Anzaldúa's life is the story of a Chicana woman who fought from the very early stages of her life to be faithful to herself and her ideas. She broke the gender expectations that her mother and her family had for her, deciding not to follow the traditional model of espouse and mother; besides, she openly declared her lesbianism despite the personal problems that this decision carried with it.

Anzaldúa suffered the profound rejection of her family who did not accept her attitude and her work or her explicit positioning before her homosexuality. She was always conscious of the patriarchal seclusion of Chicano society and of the familial and social consequences that her outspoken and revolutionary attitude generated. Anzaldúa's working-class roots are closely connected to the relationship with her mother, to rural Texas. She grew up in a profound countryside atmosphere, between ranches and farms; her family worked the land and barely earnt enough money to sustain themselves. After her father's sudden death, when she was only twelve, she had to work the land every weekend and all summers until she finished her university studies. Her free time was spent reading and drawing, this last one turned into one of her favourite ones and later on into one of her frustated vocations: "I had to give up the idea of doing visual art –not enough time to practice and be good in two art forms, to buy oil paints, brushes, and other art materials". (Anzaldúa 2000: 236) However, none of these circumstances prevented her from living as a Chicana woman and as an artist. No doubt, her past helped to forge her broad perception of the Chicana/o reality, which ranges from her years of experience working the land to her development as a writer and an intellectual.

Anzaldúa writes her memories of her mother as an adult Chicana writer who recalls her mother's words of advice and also her silence, her painful and lonely life as a young widow. We can hear Anzaldúa's voices both as a little daughter and as a mature writer, when she decides to write or talk (as it is the case of the interviews) about her mother. At times we feel the pain of the daughter when she was a child and an adolescent, other times we confront the clever analysis of the narrator as a strong adult; in both cases we hear the voice of a woman who dares to write about old and painful experiences. Sometimes she exposes her fragility more blatantly as in "La Prieta", her most autobiographical essay about her relationship with her mother. Yet, in her interviews, published in 2000, Anzaldúa seems to have assimilated the pain caused by their relationship and to cherish the most rewarding moments with her mother.

However, from a general perspective I understand their mother-daughter relationship as a richly complex "psychological borderlands" in the author's life where her powerfully contradictory feelings for her mother intermingle; as Anzaldúa (1987 preface) herself stated in *Borderlands/La Frontera* such space is not a "comfortable place to live in".[7] When imagining this particular borderlands, I wonder which are the borders that shape each mother-daughter relationship,

7. The term "borderlands" is used in the preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera:* Anzaldúa expands the original geographical meaning of the term –which refers to the US-Mexican border– to more inner personal areas such as this one.

which need to be transgressed and which have to be respected to keep a healthy independent mind as well as a close nurturing connection.

In *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, Estelle Jelinek gathers various essays on the different aspects of female autobiography in the United States and the United Kingdom. Jelinek (1980: 12-15) searches for commongrounds and differences between male and female autobiographies, in her attempt to provide a definition of women's autobiography. In general Jelinek highlights the importance given to professional and intellectual success in male autobiographies, whose narrations are especially connected to their historical moment.

However, in the case of women's autobiographers, Jelinek points out that their life narrations are usually not so closely attached to the times they live, they hardly emphasize their social or public life, and concentrate mostly on minor daily issues, on friends, and on the dificulties within the family. Jelinek continues to state that the one area where male and female autobiographies converge is in the absence of painful or intimate problems. These frequently avoided conflicts in the majority of the cases are related to the family, children, and love or intimate relationships. Taking Jelinek's conclusions as a faithful cannonical guide for women's autobiographies written in the United States, we can affirm that Anzaldúa has certainly contributed to the revision of the construction of these borders when writing about her life from her outspoken working-class Chicana lesbian perspective. Her words on her mother are one more transgressed border because she breaks the taboo of revealing the conflictive sides present in her mother-daughter relationship. The conflicts vary as we shall see in the following pages but they are all quite intimate, mainly contextualised within the family and expressed rather blatantly by the author. This transgression is especially relevant for the Chicana literary scene as within the Chicano community the mother figure has been dearly sublimed.

In her essay "La Prieta", Anzaldúa makes various explicit references to her mother and to her relationship with her. This text is the one with the richest autobiographical content, and in its first section she openly addresses several conflicts with her mother. One of them is directly connected to the difference in the experience of race for her mother and for herself. She states that, for her mother, being Mexican could easily be mistaken for being dirty and Indian, racist stereotypes she wanted to avoid at all costs: "Don't go out in the sun," my mother would tell me when I wanted to play outside. "If you get any darker, they'll mistake you for an Indian. And don't get dirt on your clothes. You don't want people to say you're a dirty Mexican" (Anzaldúa 1983: 198). As an adult Chicana writer, Anzaldúa reorganises the experience of her mother's rejection of their Indianness. Her mother is scared of being rejected for their darkness, which is exactly what she herself rejects in Native Americans. Anzaldúa (1983: 198) looks back on her mother's words and realizes how her mother's messages also lacked a profound

racial awareness: "It never dawned on her that, six-generation American, we were still Mexican and that all Mexicans are part Indian. I passed my adolescence combating her incessant orders to bathe my body, scrub the floors and cupboards, clean the windows and the walls".

Anzaldúa (1983: 198) soon acknowledges the presence of Indian blood in her racial inheritance and even plays with her mother's words: "Too bad mihijita was morena, *muy prieta*, so dark and different from her own fair-skinned children. But she loved mihijita anyway. What I lacked in whiteness, I had in smartness. But it *was* too bad I was dark like an Indian". By juxtaposing both voices, Anzaldúa is presenting us with the shame her mother felt for her looking Indian and the fear of being rejected for the racial difference. The association of being Indian, dirty and poor becomes evident for a family who has suffered the consequences of such painfully racist stereotype. It seems ironical to think that the perpetuation of the stereotype of the "dirty Mexican" is in the hands of her own Mexican mother who was in turn likely to be a victim of it. This racist lesson was very close to Anzaldúa's upbringing and long to be overcome by her: "But it's taken over thirty years to unlearn the belief instilled in me that white is better than brown –something that some people of color will *never* unlearn" (Anzaldúa 1983: 202).

Another conflictive zone in Anzaldúa's mother-daughter relationship is the one related to her extremely early menstruation when she was only three months of age. This rare physical dysfunction marked the rest of her life. Such an intimate problem is revealed at various times across her work. She refers to it as an extremely important source of physical and inner psychological pain:

> When I was three months old tiny pink spots began appearing on my diaper. "She's a throwback Eskimo," the doctor told my mother. "Eskimo girl children get their periods early". At seven I had budding breasts. My mother would wrap them in tight cotton girdles so the kids at school would not think them strange beside their own flat brown mole nipples. My mother would pin onto my panties a folded piece of rag. "Keep your legs shut, Prieta." This, the deep dark secret between us, her punishment for having fucked before the wedding ceremony, my punishment for being born. (Anzaldúa 1983: 199)

Where did her mother's fear originate? Was there an implicit fear of premature pregnancy when her woman's body became visually fertile? Anzaldúa's mother perceived her daughter's body changes and evolution as a dangerous space; Gloria Anzaldúa suffered her physical dysfunction as a silent frontier of difference between her mother and herself. As personal as it sounds she details how this dysfunction paralysed her life and her relationship with the world around her: "Every 24 days, raging fevers cooked my brain. Full flowing

periods, accompanying cramps, tonsillitis and 105º fevers. Every month a trip to the doctors. "It's all in your head", they would say. "When you get older and get married and have children the pain will stop". A monotonous litany from the men in white all through my teens" (1983: 200). No doubt these "men in white" embody the patriarchal thinking dominating her upbringing and adolescence when imposed marriage and motherhood suddenly were to be the agents of her body healing transformation. For a long time, her mother tried to hide this situation as if ashamed, even within the family: "My sister started suspecting our secret –that there was something 'wrong' with me. How much can you hide from a sister you've slept with in the same bed since infancy?" (Anzaldúa 1983: 199). In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa (1987: 42-43) refers to this reality as *el secreto terrible* ("the terrible secret"), and explains in more depth her feelings of shame for being different:

> By the worried look on my parents' faces I learned early that something was fundamentally wrong with me. When I was older I would look into the mirror, afraid of *mi secreto terrible*, the secret sin I tried to conceal – *la seña*, the mark of the Beast. I was afraid it was in plain sight for all to see. The secret I tried to conceal was that I was not normal, that I was not like the others. I felt alien, I knew I was alien. I was the mutant stoned out of the herd, something deformed with evil inside.

The tabooed secrecy and the silent shame that surrounded Anzaldúa's early periods made her feel guilty for being the way she was and she entered her own otherness within the family. The development of her body became the source of personal and family shame and the secret had to be locked away in a space smaller than the domestic. Only her parents knew, and after her early father's death, only her mother and herself.

Her mother's personal difficulties to show affection to her is another emotional area where she encounters her mother through her writing: "Though she loved me she would only show it covertly –in the tone of her voice, in a look. Not so with my brothers –there it was visible for all the world to see" (1983: 201). On her part, Anzaldúa (2000: 85) admits how much she loved her and cared for her: "I love my mother, I always tried to make things easy for her. I bought her stuff, I made sure she didn't work too hard, and even if I hated washing dishes all the time, I'd help. I looked after her. When we cooked, I made sure she got good food, instead of my brothers always getting it. She was like a prima donna to me". It is Anzaldúa's loving attitude that we hear in her words, while her mother seems to have more problems to verbalize and express affection. The author's protecting behaviour with her mother places her in a motherly position as the oldest child who becomes aware of her widow mother's need to be looked after. In the same interview she also confesses having felt rage for her mother: "I really got into hating her when I was an

adolescent. I wanted to hurt her, stick the dagger in her back. There was this love-hate between us, but I think a lot of it had to do with sexuality and being at the age when you want to establish an independent life of your own-fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. For me, I think it was earlier" (2000: 85). Taking Caplan's (2000: 241) words as a reference when she states "[…] no one is free until the truths about mothers are highlighted […]", we can see how Anzaldúa is once again exposing her inner freedom when expressing her personal feelings about her mother so much in the open.

Anzaldúa (1987:16) also confesses how she was always stubborn and disobedient since she was little: "At a very early age I had a strong sense of who I was and what I was about and what was fair. I had a stubborn will. It tried constantly to mobilize my soul under my own regime, to live life on my own terms no matter how unsuitable to others they were. *Terca*. Even as a child I would not obey". These attitudes were not considered feminine or acceptable at all by her mother. Her confrontation with her mother was her first rejection to the established rules in patriarchal society: "What my mother wanted in return for having birthed me and for nurturing me was that I submit to her without rebellion. Was this a survival skill she was trying to teach me? She objected not so much to my disobedience but to my questioning her right to demand obedience from me" (1983: 199). Anzaldúa challenges the mother figure as an authority from an early age and desastibilizes her mother's patriarchal understanding of a daughter's correct and adequate behaviour. In a later interview Anzaldúa deals with her disobedient attitude with her mother too: "My mother didn't know how to handle me. Out of all her children, she says, I've been the most disobedient and given her the most trouble; I've been the rebel, the black sheep, everything. But I haven't, I've just been myself" (2000: 85).

Anzaldúa's mother also disaproved of her appearance and of what she perceived as her daughter's "male" behaviour: "Machona-india ladina (masculine-wild Indian), she would call me because I did not act as a nice Chicanita is supposed to act" (Anzaldúa 1983: 201). Anzaldúa was frequently seen as a tomboy by her mother who could not accept that her oldest daughter liked to wear boots, was not scared of knives or snakes and rejected traditional gender roles. As Anzaldúa (1983: 202) herself wrote: "The traditional role of mujer was a saddle I did not want to wear. The concepts 'passive' and 'dutiful' raked my skin like spurs and 'marriage' and 'children' set me to bucking faster than rattlesnakes or coyotes". From an early age Anzaldúa enjoyed reading, a habit which was not accepted in her environment, and, certainly not by her mother who expected her to be doing the housework when being at home: "She [her mother] always embarrassed me by telling everyone that I liked to lie in bed reading and wouldn't help her with the housework" (Anzaldúa 1983: 201). In another stance, when being interviewed by Christine Weiland, she addmitted: "I

stopped cooking for the same reason that I stopped obeying my mother: because it was a female role" (Anzaldúa 2000: 86).

The price of rejection for her freedom and independent thinking on her family side, as well as on her mother's, did not take very long to appear: "[…] my mother and brothers calling me puta when I told them I had lost my virginity and that I'd done it on purpose. My mother and brothers calling me jota (queer) when I told them my friends were gay men and lesbians" (Anzaldúa 1983: 204). As Chicana critic Jennifer Browdy de Hernández (1998: 246) states: "Lorde and Anzaldúa bitterly describe their mothers as agents of the patriarchal status quo who disapproved of their daughter's independence, nonconformity, and creativity".

Yet, Anzaldúa perceived her mother's silent acceptance of her work: "[…] while she would try to correct my more agressive moods, my mother was secretly proud of my 'waywardness.' (Something she will never admit). Proud that I'd worked myself through school. Secretly proud of my paintings, of my writing though all the while complaining because I made no money out of it" (1983: 201). Was this approving silence enough to satisfy the daughter's search for the mother's recognition? How did Anzaldúa's mother deal with her own contradictory attitude with her own daughter? According to Rosario Arias (2005: 409) when studying the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship, "the mother appears as an ambivalent figure, since the daughter manifests contradictory feelings of continuity and separation; she is a site of identity but also of difficult closeness". Was Anzaldua's separation from her mother's traditional behaviour a matrophobic way to differentiate herself from her?[8]

Yet in the above mentioned interview Anzaldúa (2000: 81-82) speaks of her mother as a woman who had her voice in the domestic arena: "She had a strong voice in the household and stood up to my father. I think my father was weak only to her […] There were certain points where she put her foot down. He probably listened to her more than she listened to him". Anzaldúa (2000: 82) continues to say: "I don't know where my mother got this thing about women being subservient to men because she never was-not to her brothers, not to her father, not to my father. But she paid lip service". Amalia's contradictions in her own behaviour bring me back to the "psychological borderlands" –mentioned at the beginning of this analysis– where the mother-daughter relationship takes place. Anzaldúa, as an adult writer, is aware of Amalia's patriarchal discourse when it concerns women's gender roles, yet Amalia contradicts her own ideas on traditional women's passivity whenever she was not silent and submissive as a woman in her relationship with men. Anzaldúa could not understand the

8. "Matrophobia" understood in Adrienne Rich's sense: fear of becoming similar to one's mother.

incoherence of Amalia's conservative gender discourse in view of her clear, resistant and claiming voice before male power figures. Amalia was not a passive and silent mother figure, accepting male rules. In Anzaldúa's words she was a woman who was ready to fight for herself and for her children. As O'Reilley and Abbey (2000: 10) state: "What the mother models for her daughters is [...] not necessarily success but struggle: an everyday lived resistance to the world that seeks to claim and control mothers and their daughters [...]". Amalia's success was her permanent struggle to survive as a poor Mexican mother of many. According to Judith Arcana (1979: 33): "If we want girls to grow into free women, brave and strong, we must be those women ourselves". Anzaldúa is certainly a brave and strong writer model for Chicanas and for women in general, like her mother who was brave and strong, during times of personal and financial struggle. The writer tries to reconcile her painful experiences as a daughter with that of her mother's, understanding her pain and loneliness as a very young widow, mother of four, and hard-worker in the fields:

> It was not my mother's fault that we were poor and yet so much of my pain and shame has been with our both betraying each other. But my mother has always been there for me in spite of our differences and emotional gulfs. She has never stopped fighting; she is a survivor. [...] I can hear her crying over the body of my dead father. She was 28, had had little schooling, was unskilled, yet her strength was greater than most men's, raising us single-handed. (Anzaldúa 1983: 202)

Yet I think Anzaldúa breaks the myth of the good-bad mother to present a woman who created herself through painful identity borders, a woman who teaches, with her own example, valuable skills for survival. Anzaldúa learnt from a very early age that being in a disadvantageous position is not synonymous of failure. Her mother was the victim of her own patriarchal and cultural stereotypes of Mexican (or Chicana) women and she paradoxically responded to them fighting (at least externally) against her daughter's stubborness. However, Anzaldúa (1983: 199) questions her own written representation of her mother when she asks: "But above all, I am terrified of making my mother the villain in my life rather than showing how she has been a victim. Will I be betraying her in this essay for her early disloyalty to me?"

At the beginning of this discussion I mentioned how Anzaldúa deeply questioned the borders of her maternal relationship, yet she has also collaborated in the reconstruction of the mother-daughter borders when she finds the common space for both of them: they are both survivors in their own battlefields. Amalia had to survive poverty, widowhood, and extremely hard work in the land in order to raise her children and not let them starve to death. The priorities in her life were set for her in advance. Amalia did not have the racial and gender awareness Anzaldúa wanted and needed but, could she actually have access to it? Was she not

another victim of patriarchal and racist thinking within her own community? How can a poor woman suffering inner sexual and social oppression be liberated from it to satisfy her daughter's future needs?

We hear Anzaldúa's frustration but Amalia's remains unheard. The mother figure is very present in connection with the history of the land her family cultivated. The family's survival depended on the land and the produce from it, her mother's story is the land's. The drought they suffered in South Texas for three years in a row, the animals dying, and her father's death were her mother's reality. *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa (1987: 8) tells us about her grandmother's story as if told by her own mother: "*Mi pobre madre viuda perdió* two-thirds of her *ganado*. A smart gabacho lawyer took the land away *mamá* hadn't paid taxes. *No hablaba inglés*, she didn't know how to ask for time to raise the money". By telling us how her mother suffered the social injustice of having her family land stolen on the basis of linguistic disadvantage, Anzaldúa is also recalling the collective history of the Chicanos who suffered the Anglos' abuse of power as many Chicanos were not fluent in English and had no education to defend themselves; her grandmother's was not the only case.

On a different and more positive level, Anzaldúa also tells us of the time she and her mother worked in a farm weighing and packaging eggs, and how they attended several meetings where they were told about healthy eating. As a result of these classes, a cooking book was published in which her mother participated: "How proud my mother was to have her recipe for *enchiladas coloradas* in a book" (1987: 9). This is the only time we hear about some external recognition of her mother's work. For the first time we also see Amalia, the woman (not strictly in her role as a mother), proud of herself, able to contribute with her recipe to a cooking book.

4. Anzaldúa And Her Search Of The Mother Figure In Coatlicue

> "Coatlicue is one of the powerful images, or 'archetypes,' that inhabits, or passes through, my psyche. For me, *la Coatlicue* is the consuming internal whirlwind, the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche". (1987: 46)

Having analysed Anzaldúa's relationship with her mother from various perspectives, there is a void in a gender and cultural referential level which needs to be fulfilled. For Anzaldúa there were cultural and personal identity needs that her mother figure could not cover. Her personal search as a Chicana writer who was constructing the complexity of her individual and collective identity focused on a female reference where she could find strength and which could mirror her dark side too. Amalia's racial shame and her fears of becoming part of the racist stereotypes of being Mexican meant the rejection of an old

Indigenous past for Anzaldúa, the rejection of traditions and knowledge that Anzaldúa later on felt were going to be part of her personal reconstruction. Amalia's patriarchal message on the limitations of female gender roles talked of a restricted space Anzaldúa wished to abandon. Thus Anzaldúa searched for the mother figure in female goddesses such as ancient Aztec goddess Coatlicue. This way Anzaldúa was becoming her own mother, gestating, and therefore, transforming, the afflictive inheritance of her own biological mother to adopt Coatlicue's powerful image. Anzaldúa was giving birth to her re-born identity, she was delivering (not without aching effort) the vision of her new self, one which accepted her contradictory powers like Coatlicue's.

Coatlicue is a very complex pre-Hispanic deity, she is the opposite of the traditional and patriarchal image of a loving submissive mother such as *la Virgen de Guadalupe.* The traditional role of the good and always nurturing mother is represented in *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, who accepts God's decisions and orders and transmits them to human beings. Coatlicue has her own will and power, her strength is not dependant on any god or being. Not in vain was she removed when the Spanish *conquistadores* arrived in Mexico to have *la Virgen de Guadalupe* instead. Coatlicue meant a threat for the Spaniards' colonization process, she could make women think they had access to "too much power". As Rebolledo (1995: 50) explains: "Coatlicue is both goddess and monster, beneficient and threatening. Coatlicue is sometimes seen as decapitated earth goddess". Coatlicue's stone sculpture represents a solid, threating figure who is covered with a necklace of hands and a skirt of serpents. But what her scary features do not reveal are her powers to create life. Rebolledo (1995: 51) continues:

> Coatlicue (incorporating aspects of Tonatzín and Tlazoteotl) was seen as a goddess of love and sin, with the power to create and devour life; thus, she was the 'symbol of ambivalence…personification of awesome natural forces, monster who devoured the sun at night [and] brought it to life in the morning…coatlicue, therefore, represents all aspects of a dual nature and is a cyclical figure' (Anton 1973: 59)

Coatlicue connects Anzaldúa with her ancient Indian roots, a long suffered stereotyped aspect of her identity which was rejected by her mother. As Browdy De Hernandez (1998: 248) affirms: "Anzaldúa takes a more metaphorical approach, seeking an identification not with her biological mother, who remains unavailable to her even in fantasy, but with the pre-Aztec Mayan goddess Coatlicue, who becomes the symbol of female power and resistance in her text".

It was Anzaldúa who retrieved the figure of Coatlicue and theorized it in her study of Chicana identity. There is a whole chapter dedicated to the meanings she gives to her interaction with this deity in *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "La herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue State". In this chapter Anzaldúa named the concept of

the "Coatlicue state", which is the painful transition and transformation towards her self's inner awareness. It is through the "Coatlicue state" that she walks towards the construction, destruction and reconstruction of her own compelling identity to give birth to a new self:

> I spent the first half of my life learning to rule myself, to grow a will, and now at midlife I find that autonomy is a boulder on my path that I keep crashing into. I can't seem to stay out of my own way. I've always been aware that there is a greater power than the conscious I. That power is my inner self, the entity that is the sum total of all my reincarnations, the godwoman in me, I call Antigua, mi Diosa, the divine within, Coatlicue-Cihuacoatl-Tlazolteotl-Tonantzin-Coatlalopeuh-Guadalupe-They are one. When to bow down to Her and when to allow the limited conscious mind to take over-that is the problem. (1987: 50)

Anzaldua's embracing of the pre-Aztec deities calls for her indigenous recognition of her Indian self, in its most profound sense. She also invoques *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, along with the other pre-Columbian goddesses such as Tonantzin and Tlazolteotl. Tonantzin is an aspect of Coatlicue, her power to die and resurrect. Tlazolteotl is the goddess of filth: "Filth, in the Aztec world as in the Christian world, was symbolic of sin, but Tlazolteotl has four phases, related to the four phases of the moon, and in the third phase, she has the power to cleanse or 'forgive' all sin" (Rebolledo 1995: 50). It is the ancient female power, the identification of their presence in herself that positions her in a different state of mind and spirit.

This deity's main aspect is her inmense power of transformation, a model Anzaldúa provided herself with in her search of transformative answers for her questions on her gender and cultural identity. In "the Coatlicue State" Anzaldúa (1987: 51) writes about the overwhelming takeover of this transformation in her:

> I see *oposición* and *insurrección*. I see the crack growing on the rock. I see the fine frenzy building. I see the heat of anger or rebellion or hope split open that rock, releasing *la Coatlicue*. And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually takes dominion over serpents- over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexual white man's or the colored man's or the state's or the culture's or the religion's or the parents'- just ours, mine.
>
> And suddenly I feel everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center. *Completa*.

The transformation is complete when the fusion with Coatlicue is the result of her personal journey into herSelf. It is a spiritual birth but it is also intellectual

and physical, Anzaldúa becomes Coatlicue and Coatlicue metaphorically cracks her stony nature to embody her. The new being has been born, the mother and the daughter are one in their mutual midwifery.

Anzaldúa's mother lived her own gender and personal limitations in her life and transmitted them to her in various direct and indirect forms as we have seen here. She was a woman who had to follow the patriarchal rules of a world where her voice was invisible. She was not aware of her power as a woman or as a mother. She did not experience the power of individual freedom of choice. On the other hand, Coatlicue represents the idea of a strong and brave mother (as we analysed above) but she embraces no limits to her power. As Adrienne Rich (1976: 246) states: "The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand the sense of actual possibilities". Coatlicue's empowering figure expands Anzaldúa's personal possibilities to limits she (or her mother) never imagined. In her turn Anzaldúa's recognition of Coatlicue in *Borderlands/La Frontera* illuminated and expanded such limits to all Chicanas (and women in general) who are willing to learn from Coatlicue, a female goddess who creates a new reference of strength and independence from male domination. The image of the mother here is not only a biological figure for Anzaldúa, it stands for the symbolic presence that creates, reinforces and constructs her complex multicultural and multiethnic self:

> When we look closely at the different uses to which Lorde and Anzaldúa put the figure of the mother, an interesting dichotomy emerges: the autobiographical narrators' disappointment and even anger with their biological mothers, contrasting with the idealized images they present of the mother-goddesses who serve as models for their independent, emergent sense of self. In reimagining their mothers as powerful female goddesses, Lorde and Anzaldúa rewrite their own roles as women, transforming themselves autobiographically into the writers –or the mothers– of their own destinies. (Browdy De Hernández 1998: 246)

Anzaldúa is also a Mother to herself as she recognizes the contradictory aspects that characterize these goddesses in her. She has the power to construct a world of words, concepts and spirit as well as to try to unlearn her mother's restrictive upbringing patterns of gender and cultural behaviour. This way the mother figure expands from the personal experience into a more universal force, a goddess she presents to any reader willing to acknowledge inner transformation in its full painfulness.

To conclude, Gloria Anzaldúa was a social and literary rebel, her creative and editorial work transgressed the cannonical borders of Western literature. The mother becomes a fundamental agent of Anzaldúa's self-determination and self-

perception. Initially it is through her mother's denial of their racial inheritance that she is compelled to analyse and go through an unlearning process in which she questions her ethnic origins and acknowledges her belonging to a pre-Columbian people. By identifying her mother's attempt at imposing her gender roles and racist stereotypes, Anzaldua tackles the origin of her own lack of self-love, her need to recuperate and accept who she is as a woman in the borderlands of race, class and gender. According to Rosario Arias (2005: 410): "All in all these attempts to reclaim, unearth, and recover the daughter's relationship with the mother, contradictory and ambivalent as it might be at times, are deeply empowering for the writers and show a way of constructing a female subject who is defined in relation with the mother". The analysis and recreation of her mother also becomes a starting point to search for other mother figures which can meet her personal needs for an intense connection to the female. Coatlicue represents this gynocentric mother figure with which there is no emotional personal attachment but a desired inner and transformative connection. According to O'Reilley and Abbey (2000: 9): "The empowerment of daughters thus depends on the deconstruction of patriarchal motherhood [...]" which is the main task Anzaldúa undertakes whenever she is analysing her mother. The author dismantles the patriarchal attitude her mother used in her raising Anzaldúa as what a Chicana woman is supposed to be. Anzaldúa reinvents the maternal to reinforce her own multi-ethnic and multicultural identity which, like Coatlicue, can be the source of creative and destructive effects to herself. The multiple borderlands which reside in Anzaldúa needed a female image at peace with her forceful contradictions, such as the mother goddess Coatlicue. Because of her conflictive relationship with Amalia, Anzaldúa started her search for the mother figure she and other Chicanas could relate to as an identity icon. Amalia's survival modeled for Anzaldúa's who in turn seeked for Coatlicue, the great female survivor, connected to her cultural pre-Hispanic past and to her racial roots as an Indigenous woman. Anzaldúa's words on her mother-daughter conflicts and deciphering are an open gate to encourage other Chicanas to break their secrets and set their identities free.

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