

# ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Warranting Spiritual Reclamation In Chicana Literature



“I am . . . a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds” (Anzaldua 1981, p. 205), “an American to Mexicans[,]/ a Mexican to Americans[,]/ a handy token/ sliding back and forth/ between the fringes of both worlds” (Mora 1985, p. 60). The life world described by Gloria Anzaldua and Pat Mora abounds in contradiction and complexity, for it is a borderlands situated at intersections among cultures. Anzaldua (1987) describes the Chicana, a woman of the American Southwest who straddles multiple cultures, as a *mestiza* carrying “five races on [her] back” (p.194) who manages tensions rooted in ethnicity, gender, and language (Flores 1996). Potentially mired in despair because she has “so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes [she] feels like . . . [she is] no one” (Anzaldua 1987, p. 63), she also can embrace a richness rife with complexity (Anzaldua 1981), thereby meeting the challenges of a liminal life. **[i]**

Chicana literature reflects this exigence as it simultaneously articulates an antidote to fragmentation and alienation. That Chicanas should address spirituality hardly is surprising, since religion, the “bridging, bonding process at the heart of things,” tends to “the wounds of breaking worlds” (Keller 1986, p. 47). The Catholicism that grounds religious practice in Chicana/o communities, however, privileges an image of women as “suffering, humble, and passive” (Leal 1983, p. 232). Viramontes (1985) explains the impact of this tradition:

We are raised to care for [ ] . . . to stick together, for the family unit is our only source of safety. Outside our home there lies a dominant culture that is foreign to us . . . and labels us illegal alien. But what may be seen as a nurturing, close unit may also become suffocating, manipulative, and sadly victimizing (p. 35).

This potential suppression stems from a religious tradition rooted in two patriarchal systems.

Catholicism, with its doctrine of apostolic succession, elevates the masculine. Similarly, Aztec culture stripped once-powerful goddesses of their positive import

as it demonized the feminine (Anzaldua 1987). In both systems, then, “the male as warrior, . . . priest, and . . . progenitor . . . exercises power over women who are yielding, . . . submissive, . . . pure[,] and inaccessible.” The Aztecs associated the feminine with “fecundity and with death” while Christianity contrasted the “Holy Virgin” with “Eve the temptress” (Seator 1984, p. 27). Nevertheless, the indigenous and the Eurocentric also can ground a re-visioned spirituality through an Aztec legacy of powerful goddesses and the Christian tradition in which Mary’s “forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and reconciliation” signal her strength (Rodriguez 1996, p. 25).

This essay’s purpose is to illuminate the arguments Chicanas make as they advance a feminized spirituality. My thesis is that such re-vision is communal, sexual, and material. I first provide an orientation to the female figures who recur in literature of the late 20th century and then detail the way writers use these icons in warranting a re-vision of the spiritual.

### 1. *Spiritual Foremothers*

Chicanas utilize an array of female images of the divine. Central to what Castillo (1994) labels a Xicanista consciousness is the integration of Christian and native thought which reconfigures the spiritual for ordinary women. Mesoamerican and Eurocentric cosmologies thus merge in a perspective rooted in Chicana her-story, a story populated by *Mesoamerican goddesses*, the *Virgin of Guadalupe*, and the *bruja/ curandera*.

Marcos (1995) contends that a “bi-polar duality” featuring “complementary” pairs “such as life and death, good and evil, . . . earth and sky” permeates *Mesoamerican* thought (p. 29). Because these binaries are fluid, fluctuating, and equal, Aztecs maintained balance by embracing opposites. Chicanas utilize the imagery of Aztec goddesses whose defining characteristic is the balanced duality necessary for harmony.

Dubbed “Serpent Skirt,” Coatlicue boasts “a human . . . or serpent . . . head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents[,] and taloned feet.” Simultaneously awe-inspiring and fearsome, she is “the earthmother who conceived all celestial beings. . . . Goddess of birth and death, Coatlicue gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes” (Anzaldua 1987, pp. 26, 46). Tlazoteotl is “the patron of dust, filth, [and] adulterers/ promiscuous women” who wears unspun cotton and carries a broom, symbols of her power to create and cleanse (Rebolledo 1995, p. 50). A multifaceted goddess, she can change at will from seductress to redeemer. Tonantzin, who is both “our mother

and mother of gods" (Castillo 1994, p. 111), has the power to "judge, create and destroy" (Rebolledo 1995, p. 52). Linked to the moon, as is Mary, she is goddess of crops and the land; hence, her association with the Virgin of Guadalupe hardly is surprising. When Mary appeared at Tepeyac, a hill close to Mexico City that was sacred to Tonantzin, the Catholic Church seized the opportunity to promote Catholicism through a familiar figure void of the power and balance characteristic of Aztec goddesses (Dicochea 2004). The church thus "desexed" Guadalupe by taking the "serpent/sexuality out of her" (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 27).

Hands folded, clad in off-white dress and turquoise mantle, *la Virgen de Guadalupe* stands on a horned moon, framed by rays of the sun. Her legend dates to 1531 when she appeared to the Indian Juan Diego, requesting that he ask the Bishop of Mexico to build a church in her honor. Because of the priest's skepticism, she visited Diego again, this time directing him to pick roses growing inexplicably in December on the barren slopes of Tepeyac. When he brought them protected by his cloak to the Bishop, they discovered Guadalupe's image emblazoned on the inside of that garment. Convinced by these two miracles, the Bishop ordered construction of a shrine on Tepeyac so that she could minister to the Indians (Erickson 2000; Kurtz 1987).

Because this particular Mary appears alone, her image intimates power beyond her status as Christ's mother. Moreover, her garb and appearance at Tepeyac unite her with Tonantzin. Yet simultaneously, she is derivative of the Christian Virgin whose influence stems from her relationship to her son, whose mission is intercession, whose value resides in her nurturance (Nieto, 1974; Rodriguez, 1994). As "mother, protectress, and preserver of life, health, and happiness," she fuses the indigenous and the European (Campbell 1982, pp. 12-13).

Hers is a powerful resonance for she synthesizes old and new worlds while she symbolizes class rebellion (Anzaldúa 1987). Guadalupe speaks to marginalized women because she "stands among them to reflect who they are - mother, woman, *morena*, *mestiza* - and gives them a place in a world that negates them." She also evinces a personal, comforting spirituality characterized by "forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and reconciliation" that counters an image of God the Father which has become progressively more "remote and judgmental" (Rodriguez 1994, pp. 145, 154).

The *curandera* is a healer who plumbs the resources of the land, using transformative rituals to restore balance and harmony. Because she

simultaneously occupies “the borders of the natural and supernatural,” she “mediates . . . spiritual, temporal, and cultural” domains (Morrow, 1997, p. 68). *Curanderas* set bones, practice herbology, and perform cleansing rites. Some are midwives, others do massage. Because their art promotes balance, they see the body as integrated with mind and spirit (Castillo 1994). Closely connected to the earth, they are “alchemist[s]” who transform “simple, ordinary things into the knowledge of life and death,” thus inhabiting both “center” and “edge” (Rebolledo 1987, p. 119). Their resulting liminal status enables them to merge the ordinary and extraordinary, the mystical and the mundane.

The *bruja* gets more mixed reviews. Rebolledo (1987), for example, contends that the curandera chooses “to heal rather than [electing] the negative way of a *bruja*” (p.119). Castillo (1994), however, describes her as a “spiritual healer or psychic” able to communicate with the “spirit world” and attributes the *bruja*’s negative image to gender bias. Castillo’s re-visioning describes “women who are in tune with their psyches.” If, she explains, “we . . . retain . . . our insights and connections with all living things, we have a woman with developed psychic resources, a *bruja*” (pp.156-157). The healing of the *bruja* and the *curandera*, then, probes the nexus of the spiritual and the material as it represents a lineage of power, a repository of wisdom, and an intuition that recognizes interdependence and harmony.

The Aztec goddesses, *Virgin of Guadalupe*, and *curandera/bruja* each embody features used by Chicanas in their conceptions of the spiritual. The power and balance of the Aztec deities, the strength, understanding, and compassion of *La Virgen*, and the foregrounding of nature and the intuitive in the *curandera/bruja* anchor a stance that counters the conventional. The following analysis of a collage of poems, short stories, novels, and drama written in the 80s and 90s describes this stance.

## 2. *Re-Visioning the Spiritual*

“I had forgotten the vastness of these places, the coolness of the marble pillars and the frozen statues with blank eyes . . . . I knew why I had never returned” (Viramontes 1985, p. 25). A young woman thus rejects a religiosity that privileges mind over body, thereby generating a fragmentation born of “disengagement from the body, nature, and feeling” (Rushing & Frenztz 1995, p. 12). Such belief features telling dichotomies: man is superior to woman, culture to nature, abstract to material (Tessier 1997). In this schema, experience and feeling are “inferior,” perhaps even “evil.” Its resulting *telos* is a “higher, male, spiritual

world” of individual salvation rooted in abstract spirituality (Ruether 1983, p. xv).**[ii]** Contemporary Chicanas, however, advance an alternative system based in the communal, sexual, and material.

## 2.a *The Communal*

“Hispanic women’s theology” must “reflect their reality to enable them to overcome material obstacles and to participate in a communal process with other women” (Castillo 1994, p. 102) by invoking “a me that contains an us” (Randall 1996, p. 114). This privileging of an interdependence which abandons the “marooned” ego for the power of “connective selves” (Tessier 1997, p. 35) is essential, for “[w]ithout community there is . . . only the most . . . temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression” (Lourde 1983, p. 99). Chicana literature uses three moves to embrace a communal spirituality: it describes a *matrilineal legacy* embodying the feminine divine, it locates spirit in women’s communion with each other, and it situates spiritual energy within collective ritual.

Chicanas draw on a *matrilineal legacy* as they foreground female deities. In Cisneros’s (1991) *Woman Hollering Creek*, for example, Chayo tells *La Virgincita*, “For a long time I wouldn’t let you in my house . . . . Couldn’t look at you without blaming you for all the pain . . . all our mothers’ mothers have put up with in the name of God” (p.127). Eventually, however, she came to see the Virgin as “our mother Tonantzin.” When she grasped this connection, she “wasn’t ashamed to be her mother’s daughter, . . . [her] ancestors’ child.” She also understood Mary in all her “facets, all at once the Buddha, the Tao, the true Messiah, Yaweh, Allah . . . the Spirit, the Light, the Universe” and hence could love the Madonna *and* herself (p.128).**[iii]**

Other works integrate a divine her-story into everyday life. The narrator of Quinonez’s (1996) *La Diosa in Every Woman* associates ordinary Chicanas with an array of goddesses: Coyolxauhqui, symbolic of wholeness, is a “woman on the corner,” the “dismembered goddess/ whose shattered parts/ once scattered the steps/ of the patriarchal pyramid”; Coatlicue, whose embodiment of “alternating waves of/ conflict and conciliation” that result from living in “two worlds” signals the possibility of living with fragmentation, is the “braided hair” of “a Guatemalan woman/ drinking a pepsi in MacArthur Park; Malinalzochitli, emblematic of courage, is a “woman crossing the border” who is “Warrior Mother and Warrior Sister”; finally, Tonantzin is a figure “with hips the size of mother earth” who can “bless the births we give to ourselves/ and each other” (pp.104-106). Quinonez,

then, depicts the power of a healing, mythical sisterhood.**[iv]**

Chicanas also highlight the resources available through *communion* with others. In Chavez' (1996) *Novena Narrativas*, Isabel explains the comfort her foremothers bring:

When I feel alone, I remember behind me stand . . . all the women who have come before me. Their spirits are always near, . . . constantly teaching me. Today, . . . [as] I heard one woman [talking], . . . I could have sworn I heard my grama's voice. And then I thought: This woman is the thread that connects me to all women . . . . Wherever I go, I *know* the women (p. 156).

Such a thread joins the icons of religion and myth with ordinary women who interact daily. One of the fruits of their communion is their collective wisdom.

For example, in Estes's (1996) *Guadalupe: The Path of the Broken Heart*, the narrator recounts events following her dedication to the Virgin. As she witnessed the rousting of homeless people, she heard "a . . . gentle voice asking, 'Do you love me?'" and then, "If you love me, comfort them" (p. 40). Later she understood that she "had had a strange moment in time," for as she watched, she "saw in . . . them" "Guadalupe suffering" (p. 43). Subsequently, she heard the Virgin's voice, this time calling her to visit the unfortunate. Since then she has answered that call, making pilgrimages to prisons, hospitals, and shelters.

Chicanas also learn from communion with their more earthly sisters. The narrator of Castillo's (1996) *Extraordinarily Woman* describes a lesson she learned about the relationship between body and spirit from her *abuela* as she details the visit of a teenaged cousin from Texas. A week after performing the *cure*, the grandmother tells the teenager, "Don't ever allow yourself to think about what just happened with remorse," for the soul "will find another cup . . . if it . . . has business here. The important thing is that you knew you could not provide what it needed and so you made the best decision" (p. 77).**[v]**

Similarly, a vignette in Cisneros's (1984) *House on Mango Street* describes unusual but wise visitors at a child's funeral. "They came," says Esperanza, "with the wind that blows in August, thin as a spider web and barely noticed. Three who did not seem to be related to anything but the moon" (p. 103). She discovers they inexplicably know who she is and will be. "When you leave," intones one, "you must remember to come back for the others. . . . [F]or the ones who cannot leave as easily as you" (p. 105).**[vi]** The knowledge of spiritual sisters thus guides characters peopling diverse stories.

Finally, various writers present the power of collective *ritual*. Fernandez's (1990) *Filomena* describes the comfort ritual brings. After Filomena loses son Alejandro to war, she incorporates her birds into her home worship "to include . . . [their] warbles . . . as part of her offering" (p. 71). Her niece describes an especially poignant ceremony:

As the different timbres . . . merged . . . , I became entranced with [their] joyous reverence, . . . and slowly . . . a[n] image of Alejandro . . . [appeared] . . . [as] the birds' song . . . reached perfection . . . I knew that . . . Alejandro had finally come home once again. Rejoicing I prayed, "Amen!" (pp. 80-81).

Ritual thus generates an acceptance which softens grief.

In Martinez's (1989) *Only Say the Word*, three women pray together during a pilgrimage to the New Mexico church at Chimayo. The first flounders because her prayers fail to soften the suffering of a battered husband. The second rejects a religiosity powerless to prevent the tragedy of a teenager who has "found a cure/ For loneliness in the crucible/ Of her womb" (p. 148). The third, however, tells of her recovery after her daughter's death. She explains that she has healed because she has "held hands with women/ Shouting at birth,/ Shouting in black at burials" (p. 155). Her hope brings solace to her sisters as they join in ritual.

A pivotal scene in Castillo's (1993) *So Far From God* enacts an especially striking, female-inspired ritual. *La Loca Santa* is a recluse who inexplicably contracts AIDS, even though she has not left her home since childhood. On a Good Friday shortly before her death, she returns to the world for the first time, dressed in garb emblematic of *La Virgen* as she lends her presence to her community's traditional procession. Castillo's litany reads in part:

Jesus bore His cross and a man declared that most of the . . . families throughout the land were living below poverty level . . . .

Jesus fell,

and people . . . were dying from toxic exposure in factories . . . .

Jesus met his mother, and three Navajo women talked about uranium contamination . . . and the babies they gave birth to with brain damage and cancer . . . .

Ayyy! Jesus died on the cross.

[And Loca's mother] went up to the podium to talk about her eldest daughter who never returned from [Iraq] . . . .

At the hour that Jesus was laid in His tomb the sun set and the temperature dropped . . . . The crowd dispersed, slowly and quietly . . . .

No, no one had never seen a procession like that one before (pp. 242-244).

Part Christian emblem, part indigenous seer, *Loca's* participation in ritual spurs her community to articulate its needs.

Chicanas thus use archetypal resources to forge spiritual bonds, thereby challenging dogmas that devalue them. In accessing a matrilineal heritage to buttress the solace and strength which they find in one another they affirm themselves. Such a union, as Castillo (1994) notes, helps generate a "collective state of being which is so ancient we will consider it new" (p.160). Hence, women's bonds enhance the communion and ritual of those who value their spiritual antecedents as well as the sacred in each another.

### 2.b *The Sexual*

Because a passive, asexual *Virgen* represents the ideal woman in Chicano culture, "[s]exuality remains a difficult subject, . . . even among progressive . . . women . . . . Failing to accept sexuality as a topic . . . that affects . . . personal and professional lives" leads in turn to the "hierarchical fragmentation of the self" (Castillo 1994, p. 136). Castillo (1994) argues that the Church's defining female sexuality as "perverse" (p. 107) is central to patriarchal religiosity. The woman who acknowledges sensual impulses experiences guilt because, having been "taught that sex is [a] . . . crime against divine mandates," she "find[s] it impossible to escape . . . shame, regret, and violation" (p. 141). Various writers advance a counter-discourse that honors the Virgin while simultaneously affirming the sexual by detailing its *beauty* and *power*.

Tafolla's (1993) *444 Years After* affirms the *beauty* of a sexualized spirituality as a woman asks Mary: "If I gathered roses for you/ . . . Would my jean jacket sprout/ an embroidered vision/ of the same old Lupe/ with stars on her cloak/ but standing on a pick-up truck with watermelons?" She then speaks of dividing the roses between her lover and a Virgin who will "appreciate " such an act, "because despite what the Aztecs think/ You're a Chicana too. / So, 44 years from now / I'll still gather roses for you / (And for him)" (pp. 256-257). Neither embarrassed nor ashamed, she addresses a spiritual mother who understands the complementarity of spiritual and physical loves.

Valenzuela's (1996) *Virginicita, Give Us a Chance* constructs a sexually active Virgin. As Camilla stares into canal waters, she sees a figure emerge, "a gorgeous woman . . . in a rose robe, . . . showing her voluptuous body, her round firm



breasts" (p. 92). When Camilla asks this self-identified Madonna, "Were you really a virgin when you had the baby Jesus," Mary responds that "I was a woman like you . . . Jose was so . . . soft with me and one afternoon . . . [w]e loved under the olive trees hours before dawn" (p. 93). When Camilla begs Mary to use her influence to remove women's sexual shackles, the Virgin responds: "in your time there will be a transformation/[.] Like Lilith/ you are free/[.] . . . [F]rom now on your guilt has been washed with water/[.] erased from your heart" (p. 95).

In *Our Lady of the Annunciation*, Mora (1997) depicts a sensual, strong Mary: "Light enters you through every pore,/ dissolves you into itself./ Fearless, you look straight into/ the blinding sun and burn in love" (p. 35). The poem honors the female body as a giver of life rather than viewing it as a fearsome threat: "With every breath, you praise God,/ and your smile refuses to hide./ . . . As Goodness grew in you, Mother/ may the Holy Spirit glow in us" (pp. 35-37). Mora's Mary revels in all she is, thereby guiding women to see their bodies as a beautiful, sacred mystery. The poet's move resembles what de Alba (2004) terms "a politics of the body and of self-creation" (p. 127).

Complementing the beauty of a sexualized spirituality is its *power*. In *Guadalupe the Sex Goddess* Cisneros (1996) attributes responsibility for a shame at odds with her own experience to patriarchal "religion and culture" (p. 46). She likens "discovering sex" to her discovery of writing: "Like writing you had to go beyond the guilt and shame to get anything good. Like writing it could take you to . . . mysterious . . . levels . . . . And like writing . . . it could be spiritual" (pp. 48-49). Hence, she seeks guides who are whole, not fragmented, desexualized and powerless. She finds them in the Aztec pantheon:

I have searched . . . [a]nd I have found her. She is Guadalupe the sex goddess . . . who makes me feel good about my sexual power . . . I found Tonantzin, and inside Tonantzin . . . [an array] of other mother goddess. [For example], I discovered Tlazoteotl, the goddess of fertility . . . [and] sexual passion . . . [who] could forgive . . . and cleanse . . . . Tlazoteotl . . . is a duality of maternity and sexuality. In other words she is a very sexy mama (p. 49).

Cisneros thus discovers a figure to whom she can say, "Blessed art thou and blessed is the fruit of thy womb . . . . Blessed art thou, Lupe, and, therefore, blessed am I" (p. 51).

Likewise, Quinonez's (1996) *La Diosa in Every Woman* presents a goddess who celebrates her sensual nature:

Is that Tonantzin in stiletto heels . . .

shaking to the drums of each  
fertile moment that gives birth  
to new consciousness?  
Dance with us Tonantzin . . .  
bless the births we give to ourselves  
and each other (106).

Tonantzin is a powerful, proud procreator whose sexuality bespeaks insight and power.

Chicana writing, then, employs images of female deities to warrant a beautiful and powerful sexually-grounded spirituality. It describes a feminine divine which enables women to celebrate their faith so as to eradicate guilt and fragmentation. Such a stance liberates, for “when wild, erotic power is valued as sacred, we can hold our sexual and spiritual identities in deep relation; we can unfold dynamics of identity by participating in the whole picture” (Tessier 1997, p. 19).

### 2.c *The Material*

Chicanas privilege the concrete, not the abstract. This move emphasizes the wonders of the ordinary and of nature, thereby proffering a material spirituality. Thus it counters “the belief in a remote god . . . far removed from mortal, material selves” (Castillo 1994, p. 102) as it challenges a system of thought that negates women who tap into the power of the cosmic and the intuitive. Anzaldúa (1987) explains that because

[i]nstitutionalized religion fears trafficking with the spirit world, . . . [it] has strict taboos against this kind of inner knowledge. It fears what Jung calls the Shadow, the unsavory aspect of ourselves. But even more it fears the supra-human, the god in ourselves (p. 37).

Hence, to practice traditional religion, women must subscribe to beliefs that subjugate them, denying their power. Chicanas subvert this position by fusing the spiritual with the *mundane* and with *nature*.

One mechanism for proffering a material spirituality is to illuminate the extraordinary in the ordinary or the *mundane*. Estes’s (1996) Guadalupe is a Madonna who frequents life’s byways, for she grows her strongest roses in the soil where they are most needed, among horns honking, ambulances running, children crying . . . . She stands in the midst of

broken glass at curbs. She walks in every street, stands on every street corner, even those where it seems that maybe even God herself ought to be cautious (pp. 34-35).

This Virgin asks the narrator to “visit me in the home for unwed mothers, . . . lick the wounds of the wounded, . . . walk with me through skid row, . . . [and] stand . . . in the dead of winter listening to me dressed as an old man telling his life’s tale.” Hence, she “comes in untidy ways, mostly, often in very big and very bold forms . . . You will recognize her on sight, for she is a woman who looks just like you know and all that you love” (p. 44).

A Mary with a similar everyday resonance dominates Chavez’s (1996) *Novena Narrativas*. For instance, as Esperanza takes her lunch break, she tells *La Virgen*: I just came to check the mail and eat lunch. You know my needs better than I do myself. Take care of Jose, bring him home and help him to stop drinking. Take care of Isabel . . . . Make her strong like all the other women of her family . . . . Ay, sometimes, I’m so tired I can’t even pray. All I can do is sit. Sit and be quiet (158-159).

For a mother who loves a husband bearing the scars of Vietnam, the Virgin is a companion whose solace alleviates fatigue.

De Hoyos’s (1994) *Tonantzin Morena* connects the Aztec mother to her own parent as she invites readers to recognize the divine in the everyday. The poet honors her mother’s work by paying homage to the woman’s selfless tirelessness. She describes her mother as a goddess who creates daily marvels, cares for her family, and thus calls her *Tonantzin* to recognize the divine in all women, thereby affirming the miracles of the mundane.

Chicanas also create a material spirituality by situating the divine in *nature* as they use “their perception of the landscape to transmit . . . [an] identity . . . that is female . . . and deeply connected to land, myth, and self.” Their discourse affirms an intuitive power which guides the “woman hero” whose “allies” are “[n]ature and the land.” Such bonds help them access their selves as they cope with “the alienations of a male society” (Rebolledo 1987, pp. 96, 123). Those able to see spirit in the land can utilize “female indigenous energies” “by recalling . . . blood-tie memories to the Americas and relying upon the guidance of dreams and intuitions” (Castillo 1994, p. 146).

An icon that links spirituality to the landscape is the *bruja/curandera*. Mora's (1985) description is emblematic:

She wakes early, lights candles before  
her sacred statues, brews teas of *yerbabuena*.  
She moves down her porch steps, rubs  
cool morning sand into her hands, into her arms.  
Like a large black bird, she feeds on  
the desert, gathering herbs for her basket (p. 32).

The poem goes on to detail the *curandera's* day: "the townspeople come, hoping to be touched by her ointments,/ her hands, her prayers, her eyes./ She listens to their stories and she listens to the desert, always, to the desert " (p. 32). She is an intercessor whose healing unites spirit, earth, and person. "Before sleeping, she listens to the message/ of the owl and the coyote. She closes her eyes/ and breaths with the mice and snakes/ and wind" (p. 33). She thus lives in harmony with nature, grateful for its resources, its life force, and her position within its majesty. **[vii]**

In *El Mito Azteca*, Moraga (1996) locates spirit in the cosmos as she describes her experience during a lunar eclipse that occurred during a visit to Mexico's pyramids: "In those six minutes of darkness, something was born. In . . . that female quietude, a life stirred. I understood for the first time the depth and wonder of the feminine" (p. 70). This spiritual insight enabled her to connect with her mother:

[A]fter the eclipse I called my mother, . . . and . . . when describing the eclipse . . . I knew she understood my reverence in the face of a power utterly beyond my control. She is a deeply religious woman who calls her faith "catholic." I use another name or no name, but I knew she understood . . . that surrender, before the sudden glimpse of god. Little did she know God is a woman (p. 70).

The moon in Aztec cosmology is Coyolxauhqui who was banished to the stars for trying to save the world from her war-god brother (Huacuja 2003; Perez 1998). Hence, during the lunar eclipse, Morega partakes of her spirit. Identifying herself with the banished goddess because of her lesbianism, Morega's exposure to lunar power reaffirms her own dominion and that of women generally.

Other writers focus on the link between animals and the spiritual. For example, birds dominate Fernandez's (1990) *Filomena*. Before he leaves for war, Alejandro

gives his mother a parrot they name Kika, telling her, “[Y]ou have Kika and the other birds to remind you of me. Every time you hear them singing, . . . my spirit will always be speaking through their songs” (p. 69). After his death Filomena becomes even more devout. But ten years later even her beloved Kika dies. Filomena and her niece mark the event with a private ceremony. The niece explains:

We . . . buried her under a pecan tree . . . . [A]s we were down on our knees, . . . we began to hear the cooing of finches. One by one the birds picked up the sounds. Suddenly they burst out in their usual song. “How lovely they are saying goodbye to their friend,” Filomena commented . . . . Then, she traced the sign of the cross in the loose dirt. “*Requiescat in pacem,*” she murmured (p. 81).

The niece has difficulty accepting her aunt’s equanimity. Yet, at story’s end the younger woman has an epiphany. Tired of going “from one crisis to another,” she compares herself with “Filomena who had stood firm in the face of real calamities.” One evening, she creates “a huge image of Kika,” places it in a glass jar, and buries it at the foot of a tall tree. As she leaves the grove she hears strains from her youth, a faint chant of “*Flores para los muertos! Flores para los muertos!*” (pp. 86, 87).

Chicanas thus situate spirit in an admixture of the mundane and nature, often emphasizing the supra-natural. By illuminating the extraordinary in the everyday, they advance an immediate spirituality. By celebrating nature, they mine a vein rich with the resources of ritual, wisdom, and insight. As Delgadillo (1998) observes in her analysis of Castillo’s *So Far From God*, the result is a perspective that makes evident “the connection between the spiritual and the material, and between the personal and the public” (pp. 889-890).

### 3. *The Spiritual Re-Visioned*

As an antidote to alienation, Chicanas embrace a communal, sexual, and material spirituality. They adopt a *communal* spiritualism anchored in women’s communion with each other and their foremothers, affirm a *sexualized* spirituality as beautiful and powerful, and situate the spiritual *materially* in nature and the everyday. Because the claims implicit in this re-visioning rest on the warrants provided by cultural images, their discourse collectively enacts transcendence of traditional conceptions of the spiritual. That transcendence proffers a feminized divine in the persons of three *mothers* while it simultaneously unites *body, mind, and spirit*.

Chicanas describe a *mythical* mother, the powerful and dualistic Tonantzin; an *immediate* mother, the strong and compassionate *Virgen*; and a *material* mother, the psychic and intuitive *bruja/curandera*. Anzaldua (1987) details the import of reconstructing religious and cultural constraints as she describes a journey on what she terms the *Mestiza Way*:

Her first step is to take inventory . . . . She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks for the forces that we . . . have been a part of . . . . This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history, and using new symbols, she shapes new myths (p. 82).

Anzaldua's *Mestiza* thus can challenge the exclusivity of a "mythological . . . male God" (Castillo 1994, p. 124) by accessing a feminine spiritual force that balances the patriarchal divine.

A second re-visioning disrupts disjunctions among *mind*, *body* and *spirit*. Castillo (1994) contends that "the backlashes we suffer when attempting to seek . . . justice . . . are . . . traceable to the repression of our sexuality and our spiritual energies" (p. 136). This repression cripples, since to deny one's spiritual and sexual nature is to eradicate the self. Anzaldua (1987) extends this argument. "[A]nthropologists," she explains, "claim that Indians have 'primitive'. . . minds" and therefore conclude "that we cannot think in the higher mode of consciousness-rationality." "[F]ascinated by" a perspective that "says the world of imagination . . . and . . . spirit is just as real as physical reality," they label such a stance "make-believe," thereby diminishing it. The result is an objectification of all things which, in turn, serves as "the root of all violence" (p. 37).

Alternatively, Chicanas employ three figures - Aztec deities, Guadalupe, and the *bruja/curandera* - to infuse the spiritual into everyday life. In turning to Aztec foremothers, writers find complex, sexually-charged icons who embody a vibrant spirituality. This discovery expunges shame, and, in addition, creates a context in which being spiritual *and* sexual is a necessity for self-acceptance. *La Virgen*, no longer distant and unidimensional, is a presence attuned to life's turmoil. The *bruja/curandera* celebrates female consciousness by being resourceful, intuitive, and in harmony with nature.

Thus, these writers construct a "deep religiosity that transcends male constructed theologies" (Castillo 1994, p. 205) through two moves: rejecting traditional distinctions in favor of a configuration in which spirit infuses all of living;

envisioning the feminine divine as embodied in Tonantzin *and* the Virgin of Guadalupe *and* the *bruja* or *curandera* *and* everywoman. Significantly, they give face and therefore presence to the divine. Leonard Shlain (1998) argues that abstract and impersonal patriarchal religions feature “an imageless Father deity whose authority shines through His revealed *Word*” (p. 7, emphasis added). By elevating images of the feminine and therefore concretizing the divine, writers who locate the spiritual in the communal *and* the sexual *and* the material meld a collectivity that can practice a religiosity in which they honor a sense of spirit that embraces a whole woman in all facets of her being and becoming.

## NOTES

**[i]** For a discussion of the concept of “borderlands” and its relationship to Chicana/o writing, see Velasco (2004).

**[ii]** Mora’s (1986) *To big Mary* from an ex Catholic is an angry confrontation of a Virgin depicted as deserting those who fail to pay her homage.

**[iii]** Mora’s (1995) *Litany to the Dark Goddess* moves from ancient Aztec goddesses to the Catholic Church’s pacification of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The poet, however, re-visioning the amalgam Coatlicue/ Tonantzin/Guadalupe, challenging her to wake up, rediscover her power, and speak to those who need to hear Her voice.

**[iv]** Cisneros’s (1996) *Guadalupe the Sex Goddess* rejects the traditional Virgin as “damn dangerous” (p. 49), turning instead to “Guadalupe’s pre-Columbian antecedents” in whom she discovers “a pantheon of other mother goddesses” including “Coatlicue, the creative/destructive goddess,” the model of a “woman enraged, a woman as tempest, a woman bien berrinchuda” (p. 50). Her discovery thus unearths a mythic goddess in tune with her own life.

**[v]** In Castillo’s (1993) *So Far From God*, Caridad, a young woman who symbolizes the abused mestiza, survives her lover’s betrayal and a brutal attack that leaves her deformed until her sister magically heals her. She then adopts a new life, learning the craft of healing from a local curandera who teaches her to attend to her patients’ physical health and spirit simultaneously.

**[vi]** A second tale from *Mango Street* is more light-hearted. Esperanza visits a local bruja, a “witch woman” who knows many things. “If you got a headache, rub a cold egg across your face. Need to forget an old romance? Take a chicken’s foot, tie it with red string, spin it over your head three times, then burn it. Bad spirits keeping you awake? Sleep next to a holy candle for seven days, then on the eighth day spit” (p. 64).

[vii] Mora's (1991) *Desert Pilgrimage* also features a curandera, this time in the person of a woman remembering a deceased loved one and the beauty of their past experience in the desert: "I'll see us picking berries/ to sprinkle in our soup,/ all day harvesting desert herbs/ her hands still guiding me,/ at sunset grinding seeds to thicken our stew" (p. 20). Bruja, also by Mora (1985), describes a woman who morphs into an owl at night. The poem narrates an event in which she catches a wayward husband, sending him back where he belongs. Murphy (1996) argues that the poem presents the bruja as "a seeker of freedom and a champion of other women" (p. 63). Similarly, in Castillo's (1993) *So Far From God, Caridad*, an apprentice curandera, learns two important things from her mentor: first, that "[e]verything we need for healing is found in our natural surroundings"; and, second, that healing will be successful "as long as the faith of the curandera was unwavering" (pp. 62, 64). See also the array of poems in Tafolla's (1983) *Curandera*.

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