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Secular Decolonial Woes

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ABSTRACT: This essay builds on a recent intervention made by Mariana Ortega, who has called on philosophers committed to decolonization to avoid reproducing “colonial impulses and erasures” in the very attempt to advance epistemic decolonization. When connected to “practices of un-knowing,” these tendencies become an “affliction,” which Ortega labels with the notion of “decolonial woes.” The author focuses on the reception of the spiritual elements in Anzaldúa’s work to identify a specifically secular form of a decolonial woe: the disregard for the potential that spirituality comprises for advancing the project of decolonization. To counter such secularist erasure, this essay offers an interpretation of Anzaldúa’s well-known concept of *la facultad* as a postsecular methodology that can help advance the project of epistemic decolonization.

KEYWORDS: decoloniality, epistemology, Chicana, spirituality, postsecular

“The ‘safe’ elements in *Borderlands* are procreated and used, and the ‘unsafe’ elements are not talked about.”

—GLORIA ANZALDÚA, “Making Choices . . .
An Interview with AnaLouise Keating.”

“We lose something in this mode of initiation, something is taken from us: our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance.”

—GLORIA ANZALDÚA, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

I. Introduction

This essay builds on a recent intervention made by Mariana Ortega, who has called on philosophers committed to decolonization to avoid reproducing “colonial impulses and erasures” in the very attempt to advance epistemic decolonization.¹ For Ortega, a great deal of recent decolonial scholarship problematically reproduces such colonial impulses and erasures, most evident in the marginalization of women of color feminists from central conversations. This is the case even though many feminist women of color, such as Emma Pérez and Chela Sandoval, have developed decolonial scholarship before the current apogee of decoloniality.² When connected to “practices of un-knowing,” these devaluating tendencies become an “affliction,” which Ortega labels with the notion of “decolonial woes.” Decolonial woes are therefore “the silences enacted by the very decolonial practitioners who call out other silences.”³

Ortega particularly highlights the absence of Chicana scholarship in the work of Walter Dignolo, one of the leading practitioners of decoloniality, perhaps the most well-known within Anglophone circles. Even more to the point, Ortega maintains that in Dignolo’s work, one perceives a “very scarce engagement with the work of Gloria Anzaldúa” despite the fact that, as Dignolo himself acknowledges, Anzaldúa’s work has been a central spring of inspiration for many of Dignolo’s most well-known theoretical concepts, such as “border thinking” and the “colonial wound.”⁴ Dignolo’s superficial engagement with Anzaldúa contrasts with his substantive engagement of male writers, such as Édouard Glissant, Abdelkebir Khatibi, or Rodolfo Kusch. Such marginalization, Ortega argues, takes place not by means of an epistemology of ignorance (“not-knowing”) but as part of a more challenging epistemology of “un-knowing,” which must be challenged at the core of efforts to advance epistemic decolonization. Ortega then helpfully ends her intervention by posing the following question: “What other decolonial woes are there slowing down our decolonial steps?”⁵

In order to outline one concrete response to such question, I begin this essay by focusing on the reception of the spiritual elements in Anzaldúa's work. Continuing Ortega's analysis of Mignolo's treatment of Anzaldúa, I argue that Mignolo's secularization of Anzaldúa's spirituality is an example of yet another kind of erasure taking place within contemporary decolonial scholarship: a disregard for the potential that spirituality comprises for advancing the project of decolonization. I identify this erasure as a specifically *secular decolonial woe*. In the second half of this essay, I counter these secularist erasures with an interpretation of Anzaldúa's well-known concept of *la facultad* as a *postsecular* methodology that can help advance the project of epistemic decolonization.

2. Anzaldúa's Spirituality, Erasure, and the Coloniality of Secularity

Over the last couple of decades, the work of the queer Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa has become increasingly read and cited across the humanities and social sciences. Soon after Anzaldúa's untimely death in 2004, Linda Alcoff called out the blistering speed at which Anzaldúa's work was being assimilated into the canons of several academic fields.⁶ Such inclusion, Alcoff argued, did not represent a fundamental engagement with Anzaldúa's work. Instead, Anzaldúa's growing acceptance into the academic mainstream was the result of a tokenistic commodification not unlike that of other radical Third World intellectuals such as Frida Kahlo and Ernesto "Ché" Guevara. In the case of these two now internationally recognized symbols, their revolutionary communist politics have been ironically overlooked as they have been lucratively absorbed by the global culture industry. This incisive assessment made by Alcoff effectively uncovers an inverse relationship between, on the one hand, a radical figure's visibility within a given ideological apparatus (the media or the university) and, on the other hand, the extent of intellectual engagement with such figure's actual work.⁷ For Alcoff, Anzaldúa's swift canonization in the academy has therefore only meant one definite thing: "Often cited, [Anzaldúa] remains undertheorized."⁸

In fact, Anzaldúa was very much aware of the specific ways in which her work was rapidly circulating across several fields by the late 1990s. In an interview with her friend and close collaborator AnaLouise Keating, Anzaldúa noted that the facile acceptance of some of her ideas was in a

direct relationship to the degree to which these were taken to be “safe.”⁹ Accordingly, the “safe” elements are “procreated and used, and the ‘unsafe’ elements are not talked about.” Anzaldúa continues: “One of the things that doesn’t get talked about is the connection between body, mind, and spirit—anything that has to do with the sacred, anything that has to do with the spirit. As long as it’s theoretical, if it’s about history or about borders, that’s fine. . . . But if you start talking about *nepantla*—this border between the spirit, the psyche, and the mind—they resist.”¹⁰

When retrospectively read through Alcoff’s assessment, Anzaldúa’s own understanding of her work’s reception points to the “safe” *secularity* of disciplinary scholarship, and the “undertheorized” character of what is deemed “unsafe,” i.e., what exceeds the demands of secularity. In other words, if there is an inverse relationship between superficial citations and in-depth theorizations of Anzaldúa’s work, this is an inverse relationship that can be plotted along an axis of secularization: the more Anzaldúa’s work is secularized, stripped of its “unsafe” spiritual elements, the more it is safely cited. And yet at the same time, and perhaps most importantly, the more Anzaldúa’s work is circulated in such cursory secularized form, the less it is deeply engaged with on its own terms. The in-depth theorization of Anzaldúa’s work that Alcoff calls for therefore cannot neglect what is deemed “unsafe” by the demands of a secularist disciplinarity. Instead, it must account for the whole.

To this end, there have been relatively few readers who pay serious attention to the centrality of spirituality in Anzaldúa’s work. AnaLouise Keating herself has conceivably been the foremost voice on this matter, who has repeatedly argued that scholars avoid Anzaldúa’s “politics of spirit” out of fear of being discredited for lacking rigor.¹¹ Much of Keating’s own work has sought to counteract this stifling fear, seeking to “validate the spiritual components of Anzaldúa’s writings and to demonstrate that a politics of spirit can lead to new tools for social change.”¹² As it is also the case with the work of many other queer radical women of color feminists, such as Audre Lorde and M. Jacqui Alexander, the presence of spiritual elements in Anzaldúa’s work deeply challenges readers to “move beyond mono-thinking, binary-oppositional politics, and other forms of self-destructive thought and action” in order to develop “new theoretical perspectives, pedagogies, and social justice actions.”¹³ Keating then encourages readers of Anzaldúa to not only explore Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism, but also perhaps develop our own forms of spiritual activism.¹⁴

“Spiritual activism,” or “spiritual mestizaje” (often used interchangeably by Anzaldúa), is possibly the core spiritual element in Anzaldúa’s work.¹⁵ This is a politicized conception of spirituality in which “embodied practical material spiritual political acts” take center stage in the dynamic processes of epistemic, psychic, and social transformation that Anzaldúa’s work seeks to enact.¹⁶ As Keating argues, it is a spirituality committed to social change, particularly as a challenge to “individual and systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of social injustice.”¹⁷ For Theresa Delgadillo, who has further elaborated on the concept, spiritual mestizaje is about engendering a “transformative renewal of one’s relationship to the sacred through a radical and sustained multimodal and self-reflexive critique of oppression in all its manifestations and a creative and engaged participation in shaping life that honors the sacred.”¹⁸ This is a critical collective process, however, which is not to be confused with the individualism of postmodern New Age spiritualities that are often indifferent to structures of oppression.¹⁹ For Anzaldúa, spiritual activism is indeed that “whole” through which her work makes sense.

Following the pioneering work of Keating, Delgadillo, and other scholars that have sought to account for Anzaldúa’s spirituality as an essential part of her intellectual project, I here argue that a failure to account for such spirituality is yet another form of erasure of the kind alluded to by Ortega. This is a secularizing erasure that, in its policing of what is considered rigorous critical thinking, colludes with the coloniality of knowledge that has constituted the modern disciplinary production of knowledge. In the interest of advancing efforts toward epistemic decolonization, therefore, the *coloniality of secularity* must be unmasked as yet another “colonial impulse” that neglects the potential that spirituality has to be a source of transformative theory and praxis.²⁰

To be clear, the sense in which I deploy “erasure” here is distinct from the inherent selective limitation of scholarship (and all thought in general) in regards to one specific aspect: erasure is a stronger scheme of selection that could be conceived as a type of *bad faith*, where the selectivity at work takes place *knowingly* through *self-hidden* extra-scholarly considerations. It is therefore not simply a matter of intellectual form and space (“there is no room in this study for that”) nor ignorance (“I did not know of her work”). Rather, erasure implies a normative project of silencing where a line is drawn between those subjects deemed worth studying or engaging, and those that are, as Anzaldúa puts it, “not talked about.”

In a broader context (beyond the scope of this essay but worth clarifying here), the element of bad faith in the practice of erasure is connected to a certain response to criticism. For example, it has become increasingly difficult to ignore the numerous critiques of the coloniality of knowledge and epistemologies of ignorance that are at the core of contemporary decolonial and critical scholarship.²¹ As such, this scholarship is changing the terms of the conversation. It is taking away, as Anzaldúa puts it when describing *la facultad*, “our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance.”²² Traditionally Eurocentric accounts of a certain topic are therefore now harder to maintain from a position of “easy” ignorance. Instead, such incessant defenses are revealing themselves to be heavy self-conscious refusals to engage with criticism. In her later work, Anzaldúa fittingly deploys a precise term for this sort of willful ignorance: *desconocimiento* (literally “un-knowing”): “the ignorance we cultivate to keep ourselves from knowledge so that we can remain unaccountable.”²³ Thus, in my view, erasure ultimately rests on a type of willful ignorance as a bad faith response to criticism.

One last prefatory clarification: My argument is not that secularization as a certain methodological distinction is flawed per se. For instance, one could very well leave out an analysis of Anzaldúa’s spirituality when it is not a relevant aspect of the project, e.g., in a study of her usage of code-switching. This would evidently not be an example of a secularizing erasure in the sense that I aim to elucidate in this essay. Instead, my argument is that when spirituality is a relevant element of the issue in question, to avoid its examination *because* it concerns nonsecular matters *is* a result of a secularizing erasure. I claim that to make such move is to take for granted a problematic epistemic frame (the secular/religious divide) that has had a vital role in the solidification and preservation of the coloniality of knowledge. And in so far as I am interested in contributing to efforts to advance epistemic decolonization, then the implication is that such easy and innocently self-evident secularity can no longer go unquestioned. Hence, my argument that the *coloniality of secularity* must be exposed to rethink the place of spirituality as a source of transformative thinking and doing. As I clarify below, this is also not to call for a “return to religion,” but to call for the reconceptualization of what has been split by modernity/coloniality.²⁴

When left unchallenged as an accepted partition of what is considered legitimate and illegitimate forms of thinking, as a necessary component of epistemic progress, the colonialist modality of secularization that I am

interested in can then become a “decolonial woe” that hinders the process of epistemic decolonization. And to the extent that spirituality has been a vital component in the resisting life-worlds of colonized peoples (itself a meditation in the work of Anzaldúa), to recognize its value for theory and praxis is already part of an opening toward decolonization.

3. Mignolo’s Secularist Reception of Anzaldúa

I now therefore turn to Mignolo’s reception of Anzaldúa’s work. Alongside the work Enrique Dussel and Aníbal Quijano, the work of Walter Mignolo composes the nucleus of the contemporary decolonial turn. While Dussel departs from metaphysical premises, and Quijano does so from social-theoretical concerns, Mignolo’s own line of thinking centers on the role of language and culture in the unfolding of the Western “modern/colonial” project.²⁵ It is from this perspective that Mignolo engages Anzaldúa’s work as a paradigmatic example of a creative response to coloniality.

In this section, I briefly focus on how Mignolo embraces the “safe” elements of Anzaldúa’s work while jettisoning its “unsafe” implications. While no doubt fruitful in how it expands Anzaldúa’s notion of the borderlands at the level of the “geopolitics of knowledge,” Mignolo’s engagement nevertheless takes for granted the kind of disciplinary secularity that Anzaldúa sought to challenge with her pursuit of spirituality.²⁶ This has the paradoxical effect of producing an interpretation of Anzaldúa’s concepts that severs them from their spiritual nucleus. In fact, Mignolo goes as far as conceiving of epistemic decolonization in strict secularist terms, as a project to be clearly differentiated from what he calls the “spiritual option.”²⁷ For Anzaldúa, however, to decolonize is to directly confront the secularist coloniality of knowledge, or what I have referred to as the coloniality of secularity. This is evident, for instance, in her development of the notion of *la facultad* as a methodology to recover suppressed knowledges dismissed by secularist epistemologies—a notion that I will analyze in the second half of this essay. In Mignolo’s reading of Anzaldúa though, this critique of secular disciplinarity is abstracted away in the interest of preserving a secular account of epistemic decolonization. This is the move that I argue is a specifically *secular decolonial woe*.

In his first monograph *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, published in 1995, Mignolo engages Anzaldúa in the context of a critique of colonial

literacy and its relation to territoriality. For this early semiological Mignolo, who at the time had yet to fully elaborate the grammar of decoloniality, Anzaldúa's "great theoretical contribution is to create a space in-between *from where* to think rather than a hybrid space *to talk about*."²⁸ Hinted at here is Anzaldúa's theory of the borderlands, which provides for Mignolo a "transdisciplinary space for thinking about colonization *from* the personal inscription . . . in colonial legacies rather than writing *about* colonization from the rules of a disciplinary game."²⁹ Anzaldúa's first appearance in Mignolo's work then comes in the context of a linguistic and cultural understanding of the borderlands as a space inhabited by many different languages, e.g., Castilian, English, and Nahuatl. This literary/cultural interpretation is very much in line with the first wave of Anzaldúa's broad reception in the humanities, which is likely the primary object of reproach in Alcoff's critique.

It is in his second monograph, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, published five years after *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, where Mignolo develops the critique of coloniality for which he is now most known. Not coincidentally, it is also in this second monograph where Anzaldúa's work takes a more central position. Anzaldúa's work now permits Mignolo to deepen the meditation on thinking within and beyond the borders of the colonial world. This is not simply a question of interlinguistic encounters anymore but a question of epistemic resistance and decolonization that Mignolo understands with the notion of "border thinking." Border thinking is thus a model to understand how thinking dwells in between the geographic and epistemic borders of Western modernity. It is an explicit challenge to the unidirectionality of European colonial knowledges that become "global designs" as they travel outward, e.g., liberalism.³⁰ Border thinking, the thinking at the borderlands, cracks open the "imaginary of the modern world system," which allows another kind of knowledge to emerge beyond the imposing and assimilating global designs of Western modernity.³¹

A central facet of border thinking evidently involves the erosion of the hegemony of "epistemology" as a frame through which to understand the generation of knowledge. To this end, Mignolo follows Valentin Y. Mudimbe's retrieval of the concept of *gnosis* as a broader alternative to the narrow scientificist and rationalist tendencies of epistemology.³² This is an intervention that quietly puts on the table the question of the colonality of secularity, as seen for instance in the inquiry regarding the emergence of the modern faith/knowledge binary that has divided religious knowledges

from scientific ones.³³ Indeed, Mignolo is cognizant that the alternative provided by the concept of gnosis has a long spiritual genealogy referring to mystical traditions of attaining knowledge. Such genealogy perhaps comes close to the “unsafe” side of Anzaldúa’s work, such as her notion of *la facultad* as a supplement to secular epistemologies. However, this is an aspect that is unexplored in Mignolo’s text, and in fact continues to be absent in his more recent work. It is a genealogy with which he is explicitly uninterested.³⁴ Unlike Anzaldúa’s border thinking, Mignolo’s border thinking is thus a plainly secular exercise.

Mignolo’s reception of Anzaldúa is consequently a secularizing one that abstracts away what would feasibly be considered the root of Anzaldúa’s work: her spirituality. Such limited appropriation from Anzaldúa’s work has the effect of delivering a critique of the colonality of knowledge that leaves untouched the secularity of such order of knowledge. Patently, this is the same secularity that considers such spirituality to be an “unsafe” element not worthy of rigorous evaluation. What is at work here is therefore the reproduction of a colonial impulse that is slowing down our decolonial steps. Mignolo’s avoidance of Anzaldúa’s spirituality is indeed a *secular decolonial woe* that reintroduces a colonialist hierarchy to the process of epistemic decolonization. This logic culminates in Mignolo’s more recent work, where the decolonial “option” is conceived in strict secularist terms that distinguishes it from what he calls the “spiritual option.”³⁵ Such sterilized picture allows Mignolo to conceive of *la facultad* in the most abstract terms devoid of spiritual context, as only an “undisciplined” power “to do.”³⁶ While Mignolo concedes that the decolonial and spiritual options may occasionally go hand in hand, his strict partitioning betrays a secularist anxiety that has not sufficiently questioned the colonality that undergirds it. Ironically, questioning the colonality of secularity is one of the things that Anzaldúa does best.

4. *La Facultad* as a Postsecular Methodology

In the remaining part of this essay, in the interests of countering some of the secularist erasures in the reception of Anzaldúa’s work, I offer an analysis of Anzaldúa’s concept of *la facultad* as a *postsecular* methodology that advances epistemic decolonization as it recovers suppressed knowledges. Only briefly mentioned at the end of the third chapter of *Borderlands/La*

Frontera, Anzaldúa describes *la facultad* as “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface.”³⁷ A distant reader may wonder as to the significance of such concept, especially as it does not clearly return at any subsequent point in the text. A closer reading, however, shows that the very structure of chapter 3 of *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a careful actional demonstration of *la facultad*. To a broader extent, *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a whole is structured to awaken in the reader the capacity to “see the deep structure below the surface.” As each chapter walks the reader through a “path of knowledge—one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our *raza*,” *la facultad* emerges as an alternative to the secularist coloniality of knowledge.³⁸ This is because at its core, the epistemic recovery of *la facultad* is a spiritual process that re-links or re-members the fragmented colonized subject back to her forgotten ancestral home. In this approach, spirituality is a vital element in the process of decolonization.

Let us then immerse ourselves in the path of knowledge that simultaneously hones and reveals *la facultad*. The first chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “The Homeland, Aztlán/El otro México,” famously opens with an affirmation of the U.S.–Mexico border as an “open wound” that allegorizes the social conditions of subjects on each side of the geopolitical divide.³⁹ In this initial chapter, Anzaldúa offers radical rewritings of the histories of both the Chicana in the U.S. Southwest and the recent Mexican migrant who nonetheless claims to have an ancestral relation to the land that was once the home of her ancestors, i.e., Aztlán. This crucial chapter subsequently lays a foundation to understand the rest of the book. Accordingly, chapter 2, “Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan,” dives into the lived experience of the Chicana, offering a powerful critique of machismo and androcentric patriarchy from within the Chicano and Mexican cultural horizons. It is here where the life in the borderlands, particularly for the Chicana lesbian, is disclosed to be one of an “intimate terrorism.”⁴⁰ It is as a result of these historical and cultural accounts that Anzaldúa has set up her reader deep within the path of knowledge, a process that she also understands with the symbolism of “entering” the Serpent.

“Entering into the Serpent” is also the title of chapter 3 of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a historical and semiotic genealogy of Mexico’s ancestral mythopoetic roots. This chapter continues the contextualization of the origins of contemporary Chicano/Mexicano machismo by tracing the transformations of the symbol that is perhaps the most representative icon of

mexicanidad: The Virgin of Guadalupe. Recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as the Patroness of Mexico and the Continental Americas, this *mestiza* representation of the Virgin Mary is a ubiquitous national symbol that represents for many Mexicans their mixed ethnic heritage and deep religiosity. For Anzaldúa, however, Guadalupe signifies something more. Going beyond standard Christian theological and historiographical accounts of Guadalupe, Anzaldúa argues that Guadalupe's hegemonic position in the Mexican national imaginary has to do with a syncretic subsumption of pre-colonial Mexica mythology. Such examination allows Anzaldúa to retrieve a hidden meaning of Guadalupe that can then be redeployed against the interests of colonialist Christianity and the misogynist patriarchal tendencies in much of Mexicano/Chicano culture.

The standard narrative of the apparition of Guadalupe centers the figure of Juan Diego, one of the first Indigenous Mexica men to have converted to Catholicism after the fall of the Aztec Empire. An exceptionally devout Christian, Juan Diego is said to have witnessed the apparition of Tonantzin Coatloapeuh as he walked by Tepeyac Hill. Juan Diego reports this vision to Fray Juan Zumárraga, first bishop of Mexico (New Spain), who takes the dark-skinned Coatloapeuh to be the Virgin of Guadalupe from Extremadura, Spain, a black Madonna revered by Hernán Cortes and other Spanish conquistadors.⁴¹ It would take some years, however, before this Guadalupe was actually recognized by the Catholic Church as a distinct apparition of Virgin Mary local to the Americas. By the late colonial period of the eighteenth century, the Virgin of Guadalupe had come to represent the success of the Spanish colonial project in the Americas, particularly its mission of Christian evangelization of Indigenous people. By the early nineteenth century, the distinctly American and "New World" character of this symbol would unite *criollo* and *mestizo* classes to fight for political independence against the "Old World" values of the Spanish Empire. This is why the first flag of the insurgent Mexican forces was a flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a symbol that a century later once again galvanized peasants during the Mexican Revolution.

While remarking on the standard account, Anzaldúa's own examination of Guadalupe concentrates on the hermeneutic encounter of worlds represented by Juan Diego and Zumárraga. For it is in this encounter that the colonality of knowledge is employed to overdetermine Tonantzin Coatloapeuh as a representation of Mary in the context of Western Christendom. Key here is the meaning of Tonantzin Coatloapeuh in Juan

Diego's Nahuatl, which Anzaldúa translates as "the one who has dominion over serpents"—where "coatl" means "serpent."⁴² While serpents are a permeating allegory for evil and sin in Christian discourses, Anzaldúa reminds us that Tonantzin (literally "Our Lady Mother") was in fact an Aztec deity whose temple had stood in precolonial times in that very same Tepeyac Hill where Juan Diego now claimed to have witnessed an apparition. Moreover, Tonantzin is considered to be alternative form of Coatlicue, the powerful Mexica "mother of the gods" who had a "serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet."⁴³ Therefore, what to Spanish priests like Zumárraga may very well sound like their Virgin Mary, and in specific phonetic terms their very own Guadalupe from Extremadura, for Juan Diego Tonantzin Coatloapeuh may in fact refer to something entirely different. It is Anzaldúa's argument that the complexity of this entire intercultural exchange has been downplayed in colonialist narratives that see in Christian evangelization a form of cultural and epistemic progress, consequently hiding the forms of anticolonial resistance of a vanishing Mexica world.

However, it would be erroneous to assume that Tonantzin Coatloapeuh became the Virgin of Guadalupe only because of an intercultural series of misunderstandings between so-called Old and New Worlds. An important component of Anzaldúa's analysis of Guadalupe's symbolism has to do with how such process of transculturation was actually facilitated by a succession of precolonial interpretations internal to the Mexica world, where male priests slowly stripped away the status of feminine deities in favor of an androcentric value system.⁴⁴ It is this tendency that eventually resulted in Mexica society being male-dominated at the social and political levels, all the while retaining certain emphases on duality at the spiritual or metaphysical realms. In the case of Coatlicue, for instance, her ancestral duality is split into light and dark forms, leading to the conceptualization of Tonantzin Coatloapeuh as the "good mother." For Anzaldúa, it is because of this internal splitting within the gender politics of Mexica society that Tonantzin Coatloapeuh can subsequently be easily "desexed" by the colonizing Spaniards into the Marian Guadalupe.⁴⁵ This is to say that the origins of the Mexicano/Chicano machismo criticized by Anzaldúa are determined by a combination of biases that are not tied exclusively to the Christianizing colonial encounter. Hence, to challenge such epistemic subjugation entails fighting against the interests of both a colonizing Christianity and a patriarchal Mexica/Mexicano/Chicano culture.

Anzaldúa abruptly concludes the examination just outlined with a brief description of what she calls *la facultad*. As indicated above, this is a “capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, Anzaldúa tells us that *la facultad* is a “quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning” that is “latent in all of us.”⁴⁷ However, those who do not “feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense. Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest—the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign.”⁴⁸ It is in this sense a “survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds,” in the borderlands, “unknowingly cultivate.” It is a perceptual sensibility that emerges from certain disruptions to our “everyday mode of consciousness” that transforms the subject into something anew. This is a process that Anzaldúa describes in negative terms, as the loss of a prior modality of consciousness, “our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance.”⁴⁹

It may not be immediately clear why Anzaldúa concludes her account of the semiotic transformations of Coatlicue/Guadalupe with a description of *la facultad*. Analyzing the writing and revision processes of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Ricardo Vivancos Pérez has pointed out that Anzaldúa’s first manuscript draft actually dedicated a full chapter to the description and analysis of *la facultad*.⁵⁰ Vivancos Pérez does not explain, however, the rationale behind Anzaldúa’s decision to reduce that full chapter to a small subsection at the end of chapter 3. It is my argument, however, that such motivation can be understood precisely in light of the preceding account of the semiotic transformations of Coatlicue/Guadalupe. In this case, instead of analytically elaborating on the concept as a traditional scholarly manuscript would do, first by introduction, followed by contextualization and then demonstration, Anzaldúa inverts the argumentative order in a performative gesture. In other words, by placing the didactic introduction of *la facultad* at the end of the semiotic deconstruction of Guadalupe, Anzaldúa suggests that without *la facultad*, one would not be able to see Coatlicue behind the Guadalupe (the deeper structure behind the surface). *La facultad* is thus what allows one to “enter into the Serpent,” which in the example at hand means reconnecting with knowledges and traditions suppressed by a process of colonization. And it is then the exercise of *la facultad* that explains the veneration of Guadalupe *beyond* a colonizing Christianity, as seen in the aforementioned examples of Indigenous, criollo, mestizo,

peasant, and Chicane resistance to oppression, from the Mexican War of Independence and Mexican Revolution, to the more recent cases of the U.S. Farm Workers Movement. That the symbol of Guadalupe agglomerates these widely divergent movements speaks volumes on the syncretic and transcultural complexity of its meanings, all of which are only properly deciphered with the aware perceptual sensibility of *la facultad*.⁵¹

As a capacity not based on rational abstraction, it is evident that *la facultad* is not a method to be taught as a disciplinary content. It is instead an embodied skill that, while available to all, is most developed in those that inhabit the borderlands: "The prohibited and forbidden . . . *Los atravesados* . . . those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.'"⁵² This is because there is something materially significant about what it means to live and survive at such crossroads. The impact of such materiality of the borderlands on one's consciousness continues to be an understudied aspect of Anzaldúa's work. And yet, this is possibly the principal "invitation" that Anzaldúa advances in *Borderlands/La Frontera*: not only to *theoretically* engage the borderlands and its inhabitants (*los atravesados*) as subjects capable of producing knowledge, but also to enter the borderlands as a tangible path of knowledge.⁵³ This is not an analogy for an abstract theoretical process, but a moment of real praxis, i.e., in flesh and blood, where one must locate one's locus of thought and embodied experience in the borderlands. It is an invitation to understand the imbrication of materiality and consciousness, which Anzaldúa describes as a process of spiritual transformation, i.e., "entering the serpent." This is ultimately why Anzaldúa's work in general cannot be understood in strict secularist terms that a priori dissect the spiritual away from examination. Such secularist reception would be a disservice to the process of transformation, liberation, and decolonization, a propensity that I have identified in this essay as a specifically *secular decolonial woe*.

Indeed, as scholars like Keating, Delgadillo, and others have accomplished, spirituality must be accounted for as an essential part of Anzaldúa's intellectual project. In this regard, I argue that *la facultad* should be understood as an especially *postsecular* methodology that can help advance the project of epistemic decolonization beyond an implicitly modern secularism.⁵⁴ In bracketing the domain of conscious reasoning, *la facultad* puts into question the epistemic order implanted by the secular coloniality of knowledge that polices what is considered legitimate and illegitimate forms of knowing. This move allows Anzaldúa to pose spirituality as a critical ingredient in the ensemble of tools that colonized peoples have deployed

to resist and overcome colonization. To be sure, this postsecular move is not a negative dialectical reaction against the colonality of secularity that seeks refuge in the space outside the secular, i.e., the religious, as is clearly evinced by Anzaldúa's denunciation of the colonality of religion.⁵⁵ Instead, the postsecular attitude here goes parallel to the process of epistemic decolonization in also maintaining a postreligious attitude that seeks a way out beyond the modern/colonial secular/religious conundrum. Such attitude is what is behind the affirmation of the material and spiritual co-determination of the borderlands as sites of knowledge production.

A postsecular account of *la facultad* entails then nothing less than a complete reconstitution of the content and form of one's knowledge, which first involves losing something, "our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance."⁵⁶ Additionally, however, it also demands a positive recovery of what has been unjustly dismissed or repressed, but which nevertheless lives with us at a subconscious or precognitive level, in the epidermis of the flesh. Easier said than done, this is a painful process of the "intimate terrorism" of the borderlands, a process that is examined in more detail in the pages that follow the introduction of *la facultad*, in *Borderlands/La Frontera*'s chapter 4, "La herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue State." Having now "entered the serpent," one finds oneself shaking off one's old skin in a traumatic process of immobility where the border-crossing comes to a stop. Anzaldúa refers to this as an infrasubjective condition where the open wounds on the surface are dealt with.⁵⁷ This condition, however, one soon finds out, is not a deviation but simply part of the process of crossing the borderlands. It is a "site of death and rebirth . . . a metamorphosis that opens the way to acts of interpretation," as Delgadillo puts it, what for María Lugones is a "state of creation."⁵⁸ As one absorbs these changes in one's self, realizing that such halting is not a lack of movement but part of the process of crossing itself, one is soon able to continue the border crossing. This is what it means to affirm oneself as a full subject of knowledge, in relation to oneself, one's past, and the material land upon which one is standing. One reunites with Coatlicue, returning home to the "cavernous womb" to which we will all return.⁵⁹

5. Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to build on Mariana Ortega's analysis of "decolonial woes" by focusing on a secularist interpretation of decolonization

that sidesteps the importance of spirituality. Remaining with the example examined by Ortega, that of Walter Mignolo's reception of Gloria Anzaldúa, I have identified his abstracting away of the spiritual core of Anzaldúa's work as an example of a *secular decolonial woe* that does not challenge the *coloniality of secularity*. In separating the spiritual option from the decolonial option, Mignolo's engagement with Anzaldúa is therefore highly problematic, insofar as a process of secularization diminishes, if not sabotages, the principal life force of Anzaldúa's work: her spirituality. While Mignolo's work has unquestionably contributed many useful concepts to the project of epistemic decolonization, as Ortega argues, it is imperative to call out silences enacted in any process of decolonization. It is with this intention that I have explored one of the "unsafe" aspects of Anzaldúa's work, namely, the spiritual transformation alluded to by the notion of *la facultad*.

I have focused on *la facultad* not only because of its relevance to Anzaldúa's overall spiritual activist project, but also because it is a capacity inherent in all subjects that has the direct intent of challenging what Ortega calls "practices of un-knowing," practices that openly erase hard-earned knowledge.⁶⁰ In other words, Anzaldúa has already given us the tools to deal with superficial interpretations of her work and the work of other marginalized scholars writing against the grain. Following the work of scholars such as AnaLouise Keating and Theresa Delgadillo, I have therefore argued for a specifically *postsecular* account of *la facultad* that can help advance the project of epistemic decolonization beyond secularist practices of un-knowing. By sidestepping the domain of conscious reasoning, *la facultad* puts into question the secular coloniality of knowledge in a way that makes room for other ways of thinking and knowing. It recognizes the potential of spirituality to contribute to the project of decolonization.

As seen in the hermeneutics of the Virgin of Guadalupe that led to the exposition of *la facultad*, there is always something deeper hiding below the surface. This is the first lesson of *la facultad*. This example moreover plainly puts on the table the *postsecularity of decolonization*, as seen in the many instances of resistance to oppression that have come together under the banner of Guadalupe over the centuries. These historical cases are illustrations of the type of spiritual activism that Anzaldúa's work seeks to articulate and defend against the secularity of much of the field of radical philosophy and politics. Spiritual activism then emerges here as a decolonial deployment of spirituality that, in its destabilization of the coordinates of the modern/colonial secular/religious divide, should also be conceived

as being *postsecular*. On this front, Anzaldúa's work contributes to the discourse of postsecularity the much-needed perspective of decolonization.⁶¹ And through this very postsecular impetus, Anzaldúa's work enriches the process of decolonization. To willingly overlook this issue only refortifies the coloniality of knowledge that decolonial actors seek to overcome.

NOTES

1. Mariana Ortega, "Decolonial Woes and Practices of Un-knowing," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (2017): 504.

2. Ortega does recognize, however, that even at the core of the decolonial "turn," there is a debate regarding the many sources and genealogies of decolonial thinking. For a plural account of such debate which notes the input from women of color feminists, see Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Colonialism, Neocolonial, Internal Colonialism, the Postcolonial, Coloniality, and Decoloniality," in *Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought: Historical and Institutional Trajectories*, ed. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui, and Marisa Belausteguigoitia (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

3. Ortega, "Decolonial Woes and Practices of Un-knowing," 504, 10.

4. Ortega, "Decolonial Woes and Practices of Un-knowing," 506. To be sure, this recognition of Anzaldúa is nowhere to be found in the first edition of *Local Histories/Global Designs*, arguably Mignolo's most important book, which not coincidentally is also the book of his that owes the most to Anzaldúa's work. It is only in the Preface to the text's reissued edition, published in 2012 (twelve years after the first edition), where Mignolo recognizes his intellectual debt to Anzaldúa. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Reissue ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), xx. It could be argued that such belated recognition was a direct response to the criticisms that the first edition of *Local Histories/Global Designs* received, notably from Latina feminists—reflected in Ortega's own position. I thank Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel for bringing to my attention the Latina response to *Local Histories/Global Designs*.

5. Ortega, "Decolonial Woes and Practices of Un-knowing," 511.

6. Linda Martín Alcoff, "The Unassimilated Theorist," *PMLA* 121, no. 1 (2006): 255–59.

7. In the 1990s, M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty had already made a similar analysis of how intellectuals of color tend to be received in the academy: their intellectual production is accepted as anecdotal or experiential content, all the while minimizing their capacity to alter the forms of the scholarly conversation. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

8. Alcoff, "The Unassimilated Theorist," 256.
9. Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Making Choices: Writing, Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Political—An Interview with AnaLouise Keating," in *Interviews/Entrevistas*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2000), 159.
10. Anzaldúa, "Making Choices," 159.
11. AnaLouise Keating, "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe': Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," *Feminist Studies* 34, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2008): 54–55. See also Keating's "From Borderlands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras: Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 4, no. 3 (2006): 5–16. Other active scholars pursuing the study of Anzaldúa's spirituality are Theresa Delgadillo, Lara Medina, Christopher Tirres, among others. See Theresa Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Lara Medina, "Nepantla Spirituality: An Emancipative Vision for Inclusion," in *Wading Through Many Voices: Toward a Theology of Public Conversation*, ed. Harold J. Recinos, 279–94 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011); and Christopher D. Tirres, "Spiritual Activism and Praxis: Gloria Anzaldúa's Mature Spirituality," *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2019): 1–22.
12. AnaLouise Keating, "Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Transformation, and the Politics of Spirit," in *Entre Mundos/Along Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 253.
13. Keating, "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe,'" 66.
14. Keating, "Shifting Perspectives," 253.
15. Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2007), 103.
16. Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 39, 19, 90.
17. Keating, "Shifting Perspectives," 242.
18. Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje*, 1.
19. Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje*, 7. This is a point often lost in the secularizing accounts of Anzaldúa's spirituality. See, for instance, Jean Franco, "The Return of Coatlicue: Mexican Nationalism and the Aztec Past," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (2004): 216.
20. I develop this argument at length in a manuscript in progress based on my dissertation "Decolonial Responses to Secularism from the Underside of Modernity" (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 2020).
21. Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, and Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).

22. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 61.
23. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 2. For an analysis of Anzaldúa's epistemology of self-knowledge/ignorance, see Andrea J. Pitts, "Gloria E. Anzaldúa's Autohistoria-teoría as an Epistemology of Self-Knowledge/Ignorance," *Hypatia* 31, no. 2 (2016): 352–69.
24. Again, I develop this argument at length in a manuscript in progress based on my dissertation "Decolonial Responses to Secularism from the Underside of Modernity."
25. For an expanded contextualization of Mignolo's contributions to epistemic decolonization, especially in the context of another example of decolonial *praxis* (the Zapatistas from Southeast Mexico), see my essay "Did You Listen? Zapatismo and Epistemic Decolonization," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* (forthcoming). For a brief outline of Dussel's (post)secular framings, see my essay "Which Secular Grounds? The Atheism of Liberation Philosophy," *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* (forthcoming).
26. Walter D. Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (2002): 57–96.
27. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 34.
28. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, & Colonization*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), xiii.
29. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, xiii.
30. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3.
31. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 23. Reacting to how Mignolo jettisons a gender analytic in the theorization of epistemic decolonization, María Lugones has called for a "feminist border thinking" that centers the "liminality of the border [a]s a ground, a space, a borderlands, to use Gloria Anzaldúa's term, not just a split," dwelling on the common fractured loci, histories of resistance, in coalition, so as to learn about each other. María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 753.
32. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 10–12; Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
33. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 11, 8.
34. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 9.
35. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 34.
36. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 11. To be sure, Walsh's own reception of Anzaldúa does not share Mignolo's secularization, as she is attentive to the epistemic transformations facilitated by Anzaldúa's spirituality.
37. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 60.
38. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 41.

39. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 24.
40. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 42.
41. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 51.
42. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 51.
43. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 49–50.
44. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 49.
45. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 49–50.
46. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 60.
47. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 60–61.
48. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 60.
49. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 61.
50. Ricardo F. Vivancos Pérez, *Radical Chicana Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 42.
51. These examples could also be seen as moments when spiritual activism is deployed in action, a point I return to in the conclusion.
52. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25.
53. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 20.
54. By deploying the notion of the postsecular, I am in part integrating Anzaldúa's intellectual project to the ongoing debate across the humanities and social sciences that seeks to rethink the role of secularization in modernity. See Justin Beaumont, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity* (London: Routledge, 2019). I elaborate this argument further in the aforementioned manuscript in progress.
55. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 59.
56. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 61.
57. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 70.
58. Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje*, 8; María Lugones, "On Borderlands/La Frontera: An Interpretive Essay," *Hypatia* 7, no. 4 (1992): 31–37.
59. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 68, 32.
60. Ortega, "Decolonial Woes and Practices of Un-knowing," 513.
61. Nelson Maldonado-Torres's warning—that without voices like Anzaldúa's and that of other women of color, the discourse of the postsecular simply "won't go very far"—thus continues to be relevant. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Secularism and Religion in the Modern/Colonial World-System: From Secular Postcoloniality to Postsecular Transmodernity," in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, ed. Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 382.

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