

“My job as an artist is to bear witness to what haunts us, to step back and attempt to see the pattern in these events (personal and societal), and how we can repair el daño (the damage) by using the imagination and its visions. I believe in the transformative power and medicine of art” (2015, 10).

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Let Us Be the Healing of the Wound: The Coyolxauqui Imperative—La Sombra y El Sueño*

“Imagination, a function of the soul, has the capacity to extend us beyond the confines of our skin, situation, and condition so we can choose our responses. It enables us to re-imagine our lives, rewrite the self, and create guiding myths for our times” (2002, 5).

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *(Un)natural Bridges, (Un)safe Spaces*

BORDER ARTE AS MEDICINE: Healing Beyond the Confines of Our Skin

Amanda Ellis

Abstract: *Inspired by Chicana literature's emphasis on healing, this essay begins with a close reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's poem, "La Curandera" as a means of theorizing the concept of Border Arte-as-Medicine given that this poem remains a critical site from which to chart a distinctly Anzaldúan legacy that situates border artists, and border arte itself as vital to our conceptualizations of healing. In addition, this essay gestures towards the transformative power of curanderismo and its importance in Chicana writing. It then turns to ire'ne lara silva's short story, "duérmete" to show how another Chicana feminist writer is not only in metaphoric conversation with Anzaldúa, but further developing a distinctly Chicana discourse on healing. The article reveals an enduring commitment to return to, recuperate, and refashion the tenets of curanderismo in order to heal from the ongoing trauma associated with Chicana/o experiences in the neoliberal moment, a call posed by Chicana writers in the post-Chicana/o Movement era.*

Key Words: border art; Chicana feminism; Chicana literature; curanderismo; Gloria E. Anzaldúa; healing; Mexican folk healing

In the classic 1904 medical essay titled "Aequanimitas," Sir William Osler, one of the founding professors of Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, asserts that "The practice of medicine is an art" (1904, 36). More than a century later, Gloria Anzaldúa, a figurative curandera in her own right, calls us to think of the transformative power and "medicine of art" (2009, 304). By placing Osler's statement in conversation with Anzaldúa, one can note that she disarticulates medicinal healing from a scientifically sanctioned nexus of biomedical practices and instead presupposes a radical reversal: art is medicine. She highlights art's ability to transform, contemplates its capacity to heal and speaks back to Western

ideas about medicine. Attending to the introductory epigraphs specifically, and to Anzaldúa's larger body of work more broadly, enables us to begin to mark the conceptual territory traveled by post-Movement Chicana feminist writers at the turn of the new century, by articulating the notion that Chicana literary productions are therapeutic, palliative, and reparative.¹ In addition, the epigraphs suggest that the act of uncovering and representing the hidden relations animating the Chicana/o experience, including their metaphysical and ontological significance vis-à-vis artistic production, opens the possibility of radical transformation—the kind that refuses to omit the impact and role of the spirit. By spirit, I am specifically referencing the nonphysical character of a subject or “invisible, yet felt aspect of our being” (Facio and Lara 2014, 11). Hence, Anzaldúa presumes a subject that refuses to be “split” by social ontological realism and invokes the spirit when calling into question the ethereal power of the “imagination” and its “visions,” and the ways our histories and past-lived experiences “haunt” us (2009, 304). Simply put, Anzaldúa deconstructs the legacy of Cartesian dualism as *daño*. This legacy understands human life as a sentient body entirely separate from an intangible nonphysical spirit and this construction is reified as natural and scientifically accepted as a universal norm. In direct contrast, she comments on the metaphysical impact our lived realities have on our spirits, and more important, how spirit can propel us to imagine and fashion a type of healing where we become our own healer(s) through transformative processes that take us “beyond the confines of our skin” (Anzaldúa 2009, 243).

In the following, I reveal the centrality of Anzaldúa's fervent commitment to the politics of spirit in the name of healing embedded throughout her oeuvre and assert that this commitment remains a steadfast impulse within Chicana/o literary productions. This essay pushes back against what Laura E. Pérez cogently problematizes as the “consignment of the spiritual to the intellectual

borderlands” (2007, 1). In addition, I underscore how early Gloria Anzaldúa engaged the cross-section of border arte-as-medicine, given that by Anzaldúa’s (1987) *Borderlands*, the power and logic of curanderismo was not only on her mind, but she was enacting border arte-as medicine even as she cleared the theoretical terrain to theorize such a concept. Lastly, I explore how such conceptualizations of healing continue to shape the contours of the Chicana post-Movement literary landscape by analyzing ire’ne lara silva’s (2013) short story “duérmete.” Post-Movement Chicana writing insists on foregrounding tools such as relationality, and interconnectedness as ways to insist upon the transformative spiritual and societal power generated by enacting radical compassion towards others.² Tapping into this power requires that one recognize the larger forces that structure patterns of disease, distress, and trauma. The notion of border arte-as-medicine is a useful decolonial tool with the capacity to ethically respond to legacies of colonialism and violence caused by neoliberal “reforms,” in and through its ability to deconstruct the chimera of freedom and well-being espoused in the era of de-regulated free-trade. In *Entre Mundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, AnaLouise Keating describes the unique praxis undergirding much of Anzaldúa’s writing as “spiritual activism.” She describes it as nothing short of

a visionary experientially-based epistemology and ethics, a way of life and a call to action. At the epistemological level, spiritual activism posits a metaphysics of interconnectedness and employs relational modes of thinking. At the ethical level, spiritual activism includes specific actions designed to challenge individual and systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of social injustice. Spiritual activism is spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for transformation (2005, 242).

This emphasis on transformation forges the possibility for producing new creative and critical pathways useful for further (re)conceptualizing how to heal one's self and heal one's community.³ The creation of these pathways at times draws from and refashions the logic of curanderismo. One such pathway proposes border arte-as-medicine as a decolonial strategy for responding to *susto*, and negotiating trauma of all kinds, including but not limited to the trauma coloniality introduced, a trauma whose symptoms and ramifications continue to evolve through the practice of neoliberalization.⁴ By neoliberalism I am referring to the philosophy and economic practice that asserts the ideology of free-trade and the belief that autonomous self-regulating markets will produce the common good and lead to collective prosperity.

In the trajectory of her written works, Gloria E. Anzaldúa writes about communal and personal wounds she witnessed and experienced firsthand. By weaving linguistically complex and generically hybrid texts that directly address the lacunae and labels that have intersectionally “split” her and her community in and through intra-communal and institutional racism, classism, and heteropatriarchy, she achieved landmark status within Chicana/o Studies. Because of her theorizations of the borderlands, one cannot overstate the impact and importance of her written works in shaping the Chicana/o literary archive in general and Chicana feminist thought in particular. Here, I specifically invoke her (1987) *Borderlands* as her most far-reaching and crucial text because the decolonial struggles insisting on the importance of border arte-as-medicine for the purpose of healing are linked to the experiences Anzaldúa theorized by virtue of being colonial legacies and remain hallmarks of the post-Movement literary landscape.

Chicana Aesthetics of Healing and Anzaldúa's Curandera

Border arte-as-medicine informed Anzaldúa's writing from the earliest beginnings and continued to shape her theoretical contributions until the very

end. For example, in *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa's poem, "La Curandera," describes a person who undergoes total transformation, from wounded to healer. Here, Anzaldúa presents a U.S. subject in need of physical healing. Suffering with an un-named illness that has turned the speaker's leg white, the speaker is frantic, immobile, and in need of a cure (1987, 198). Anzaldúa's refusal to delimit and define the nature of the pathology in question exemplifies a wholesale refusal to subscribe to Western medicine's constructions of illness. It invites us, instead, to read the illness at the heart of this poem as stemming from forced assimilation, and/or from a milieu of larger forces within and outside her community that cause great pain, processes of exclusion Anzaldúa takes up in the book more broadly. By framing assimilation as illness, she is able to track its frightening capacity to confine, constrict, and debilitate, and she exposes the anxiety questions of assimilation and authenticity provoke. Not only does this poem reflect how the Chicana/o cultural body negotiates injustice and exclusion, it also reveals the sociogenic causes to our suffering, our vitality, or both, given that Anzaldúa defines trauma and illness as tightly tethered to societal ills. Faced with illness, the ailing speaker seeks help from her community. Her community seeks recourse transnationally and this opens up the space for readers to "wrestle with assimilation in terms that disrupt and exceed the nation form" (Cutler 2015, 17).

Her community decides her help is in Mexico, and this is significant for two reasons. One is the idea that treatment and, therefore, recovery must come from the other side of the border is a clear holdover from the principles of the Chicana/o Movement whereby a return to Mexico is imagined as an Edenic site where an authentic recovery of culture (here read as health and well-being) can ensue. Take, for instance, the Chicana/o Movement's call for the return of the territories ceded through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo for the creation of the territory known as Aztlán, or the literal journey back to Mexico that

Chicana/o protagonists often figure into their literary works.⁵ Unsurprisingly, the speaker of the poem finds herself in a transnational struggle to heal wherein the only way to authentically heal can be found in a return to Mexico, a return dependent upon an impossible (figurative and physical) border crossing for the Chicana in question. Cleverly, the prospect of healing coming only from the other side of the border stages a dynamic concern for the border crosser(s) regardless of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. The act of border-crossing (as in most cases) becomes a matter of life and death, and by extension the act implicates concern for the vitality of the community itself.

With the speaker unable to cross the border herself, we learn that “Juan Dávila crossed the border/ to bring the healer” to the U.S. side of the frontera to heal her (Anzaldúa 1987, 176). Juan Dávila, the only named person in the poem, appears to be just another member of the community; however, he is hugely significant and rivals the importance of the curandera figure the community seeks. While the curandera is the only person deemed equipped with the knowledge of folk medicine and ability to heal the speaker of the poem, one cannot overlook Juan Dávila’s character and his importance as a pivotal communal figure. Here, Anzaldúa directly invokes and simultaneously pays homage to the Chilean artist in the world outside of the text.⁶ Juan Dávila, the artist, is widely known for confounding any notion of the normative body in his artwork and this underscores Anzaldúa’s longing to “go beyond the confines of the skin” (Brett 1990, 38). In specifically naming him, Anzaldúa foregrounds the critical role border artists play in healing communities.⁷ A border crosser in his own right, Juan Dávila is a Latin American artist residing in Australia who is noted for his ability to expose “ancient antagonisms and power struggles, not in terms of secure and separate identities, but in terms of cross-breedings, cross-infections, and mixings, touching on intimate taboos and repressions” (Brett 1990, 107). Accordingly, in Anzaldúa’s poem, the ailing speaker and Juan Dávila are both

entremundos (between worlds) as border-crossers in the space between life and death, and both agree to reject narrowly defined notions of healing and defer to communal ways of knowing by seeking recourse for a deadly ailment outside the logic of Western biomedicine. “La Curandera” is one of the earliest places Anzaldúa invites us to read border artists as communal curanderas/os and shows that “their work is one of spiritual activism and holistic alliance” (Hernandez-Avila 2005, 237). Unfortunately, however, in the world of the poem, instead of finding the curandera, when Juan Dávila arrives in Mexico, he finds that the healer he sought is dead. Through this death Anzaldúa portentously characterizes the peril and despair experienced in the borderlands in the neoliberal moment. In this moment, traditional healers and traditional answers are at risk. Given that Anzaldúa is writing around the time when structural adjustment programs put Mexico in a position where it even had to begin importing its own corn, her poem gestures toward the urgency of returning to traditional recourses in order to refashion our own healing (Carlson 2013).⁸

To make matters even worse, the illness that had once afflicted only the speaker of the poem is, in fact, contagious. In this work, communal fear fuels the disease’s epidemiologic ability to spread. It is then that the sobrino of the poem’s narrator who now believes he himself is also sick—dies. Anzaldúa writes: “It doesn’t matter if one is sick or not/ what matters is that one thinks so” (1987, 176). In fact, the illness—and the fear of the illness itself—has taken hold of the community at large. Much like a helix, the mind/body/spirit are constitutive and intertwined, and the illness of one individual has the potential to affect the entire community. In one scene, Anzaldúa effectively makes plain the always already imbricated ways in which the mind/body/spirit are unified and co-articulated in matters of wounding, illness, and healing and insists that border artists become healers to ensure the vitality of their communities by practicing border arte-as-medicine.⁹

The painting *Wuthering Heights I*, which Anzaldúa obliquely conjures in her poem, “La Curandera” (see Figure 1), but outrightly mentions in her essay “Border Arte: Napanla En Lugar de la Frontera” stages Juanito Laguna three times. Argentinean artist, Antonio Berni, a key figure in the Latin American Nuevo Realismo Movement, developed Juanito Laguna’s character, as part of a post-1950s critique of industrialization and poverty. Juanito Laguna functions as an archetype of Latin American reality and is a symbol that Berni created through hyper-realist “paintings, collages, assemblages, constructions and objects, woodcuts, xylo-collages,” at times incorporating refuse and waste materials extracted from the neighborhoods characterized by poverty



Figure 1
Juan Dávila. *Wuthering Heights I*. 1990. Oil on Canvas. © Juan Dávila. Courtesy Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art, Melbourne.

in Buenos Aires (Pacheco 2013, 21). Juanito Laguna's character gives visual testimony to the sad vulgarity that accompanied the industrialization, waste, and consumption of this era throughout Latin America and the Third World. In his painting *Wuthering Heights I*, the Chilean artist Juan Dávila redeploys Berni's image of Juanito Laguna. Provocatively, Dávila replaces Emily Brontë's central character Catherine, from Brontë's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights*, with a queering of Berni's Juanito Laguna. In a "shockingly carnal" reworking of Berni's character and an outright displacement of Brontë's character, as part of a Balthus-inspired painting Juan Dávila uses Juanito and Heathcliff to enact the "return of the outcast" (Brett 1990, 100). Much like



the speaker of Anzaldúa's poem, Juanito Laguna's leg in the first medallion of the painted panel appears swollen, infirmed, white, bandaged, and splinted. Given that Anzaldúa openly admired Juan Dávila's art precisely because she considered him a paradigmatic border artist and thought highly of his ability to make use of the debased, hybrid, and fragmentary to challenge the exotification and neoliberalization of Latin America, it is important to think through Anzaldúa's aestheticization of the role of the border artist and their capacity to heal.

Haunted by illness, the speaker of Anzaldúa's poem survives because of the steadfast and compassionate prayer of the visionary Juan Dávila, who intercedes on her behalf and brings her back to life. Anzaldúa gives primacy to the holistic ways in which healing comes about at the hands of the border artist. She does this not only by going against the notion that the mind and body are split, but by also pointing to the ways (intra/inter/transnational) relationships between people within a given community have the power to arbitrate the possibility of hope, wellness, or illness of that very community. In doing this, Anzaldúa poetically inscribes the complexity of illness and healing and takes note of how flesh and bone interplay with mind/body/spirit. In fact, it is the fervent prayer from a fellow border crosser—a common ritual in the realm of the spirit—that awakens the spirit guides who return to say: “We will teach you . . . / but first you must gather herbs” (Anzaldúa, 1987, 176). The lesson here is that one must resist uncritical “common-sense” notions of assimilation and one can do so by returning to the roots of *curanderismo*. For this reason, George Hartley sees Anzaldúa's project as its own form of *curanderismo* and refers to Anzaldúa as the “Curandera of Conquest,” arguing that *Borderlands* is the “identification of a weapon in the fight against colonization and the remedy that can cure the stunted spiritual condition of internalized colonization” (2010, 156).

At the heart of border arte-as-medicine is not only the border artist but also the recuperation of one's cultural roots through the healing art of curanderismo. At the end of the poem, the once ailing woman is transformed. Only through her initiation into the knowledge of curanderismo can she become her own healer. In the final three stanzas of "La Curandera," Anzaldúa writes,

Juan Dávila and I went into the fields.

"No this way," Juan Dávila told me.

I smiled and followed him.

We found nothing but weeds.

"*Curandera*, you knew
there were no *yerbitas* here"

"Oh, there's a few," I said.

"Look behind that big weed."

Juan Dávila bent down,

Saw a tiny *romero* plant.

When he reached out to pick it

I said, "No leave it, it's too small."

"The weeds are choking it," he said,

"and it's got no leaves."

"Help it," I told him.

"I'll go get the hoe," he said.

"No, there's no time, the plant will die.

She needs room," I said.

The weeds began to move back.

The *romero* began to grow.

The weeds moved further back.
“No, *pendejos*, let’s kill her,” said a big ugly *quelite*.
“No, she’s so pretty,” the others said
holding him back.

The tiny *romero* grew and grew,
Told them, “You’re pretty too.”
The weeds became long graceful grasses,
They bowed down to the *romero*.
Herbs of all kinds
Poked their heads out of the earth
Covered the fields.
I’ve been a *curandera*
Since that day
And Juan Dávila has been my apprentice (1987, 200-201).

The fate of a simple rosemary plant (*romero*), the fate of the wild spinach (*quelite*), and the fate of the “Herbs of all kinds” that Anzaldúa mentions are bound up with the fate of the *curandera* and her apprentice (the border artist) and therefore bound with the fate of the community.¹⁰ Survival here is a spiritual grassroots communal endeavor.¹¹ A cursory untrained look at the plants shows that they are easily confused, misclassified, or dismissed as mere weeds. However, in spite of Juan Dávila’s initial misreading of the herbs in question, his contribution as a border crosser solidifies his potential therapeutic power to heal. The speaker of the poem’s capacity to mitigate communal loss is nonexistent before Juan Dávila’s prayer, and her power as healer is unavailable to her without their collaborative cultivation of the plants. They recuperate their power to heal through their inter-subjective collaboration and their recognition that the tiny *romero* merely needed space to grow.

The animus between the plants in the penultimate stanza, “No, pendejos, let’s kill her,” shifts into high regard and appreciation for the plant’s beauty: “No, she’s so pretty.” The plants are brought back in balance, and so begins the transformation. The old-world plant, romero, known as the herb of remembrance and used in limpia rituals, signals that the limpia ritual practice that circulated prior to colonization was not totally lost because of colonization: all may be recuperated and revitalized through cultural memory. In fact, border artists like Anzaldúa and others act as cultural curanderas by remembering and re-imagining a variety of relations that were almost lost through colonization. Anzaldúa’s “La Curandera” enacts this remembering by poetically preserving the centrality of recovering culturally specific healing practices. In this poem, what springs out of the earth are more than just weeds; they are living breathing, speaking elements with the metaphoric and medicinal power to restore and transform us all. As María Lugones reminds us,

The civilizing transformation justified the colonization of memory, and thus of people’s senses of self, of intersubjective relation, of their relation to the spirit world, to land, to the very fabric of their conception of reality, identity, and social ecological, and cosmological organization (2010, 745).

Therefore, planetary connections, those interdependent relationships between all living things, which govern all living things, are paramount in this poem. The poem describes the workings of life itself metaphorically through the relationships between the people (Border Patrol, the sick, the healer, the community) and their relationship to all nonhuman living things through the romero and the quelite. Here, the plants not only signify where the power of curanderismo is physically rooted, they simultaneously gesture toward the layered interconnected ecological, cosmological, and planetary dimensions

of social power at play, shaping the vitality and lives of all people.¹² For this reason, Priscilla Solis Ybarra can point to the importance of returning to a poem such as this and to what she calls Mexican American “goodlife writing.” Her work, *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment* argues that we can no longer afford to ignore the interconnections nor the “unique ways” Chicanas and Chicanos continue to negotiate environmental issues throughout their written works (Solis Ybarra 2016, 16). Solis Ybarra contends that Mexican American writings embrace “the values of simplicity, sustenance, dignity and respect” and they cultivate “a life-sustaining ecology for humans” (2016, 4–5).

Encroaching on and determining the personified and gendered is romero plants’ capacity to survive not only the weeds, but also Juan Dávila’s eye. Both the weeds and Juan Dávila at times imperil the romero plant’s ability to survive, and this represents the complex tension characterizing our tenuous relationships between ourselves as people, and our relationships to all other living things. Anzaldúa’s “La Curandera,” invites us to interrogate the crucial importance of border artists, the vital significance of plants to ecology and to the fate of all living things on the planet, and to draw attention to the primacy of our interconnectedness.¹³ In addition, her poem cleverly encodes a threat to the Chicana (communal) body as a threat to the healing arts of curanderismo and to plant life itself, and it does so by pointing to the forces within and outside the community producing this threat.

Interestingly, it is the role of the wounded and the responsibility of an ill Chicana and compassionate artist-turned-apprentice to speak up and uncover the hidden relations that block us from recognizing the powerful relationships between living things. In the absence of a curandera who can repair el daño, the spirit guides have returned to transform the wounded into the very healer

she initially sought. Grounded on the assumption that we are physically, spiritually, and ontologically permeable and able to transform, the speaker of the poem shifts from wounded to healer. Because the curandera she sought was dead, she initiated a radical act of transformation, and through curanderismo, she becomes a healer herself. Most importantly, this poem is useful for theoretically marking the ontological permeability of identity and for signaling that no transformation ends in a type of fixity. The shift from wounded to healer is part of a larger impermanent cyclical transformative process. This dynamic makes the power to heal available to all people and recodes individual wounding as a possibility for communal healing and communal transformation. Chicana feminist writers are developing and further elaborating what this transformation can look like across their narratives.

Chicana Feminist Healing Arts in ire'ne lara silva's "duérmete"

Take, for instance, ire'ne lara silva's (2013) collection of short stories titled *Flesh to Bone*. Here, lara silva creatively responds to Gloria Anzaldúa's mandate that we become the healers of the wound by offering nine short stories, all of which reach across spiritual, linguistic, and gender divides in the name of healing and transformation, reflecting a distinct Anzaldúan legacy. In theorizing the significance of Anzaldúa's archive, AnaLouise Keating describes the transformative power of "threshold" theorizations:

Threshold theories start elsewhere—with the presupposition that we are all intimately, inextricably linked with all human and nonhuman existence. Each individual being is interrelated with all that exists—on multiple levels and in multiple ways, ranging from economics and ecology to language, social systems and energy. By thus positing our radical interconnectedness, threshold theories contain but exceed the exclusionary ontological frameworks, the principle of

negative difference, and the either/or thinking found in oppositional consciousness and other Enlightenment based worldviews (2013, 11).

Threshold theories are useful for understanding the written works of ire'ne lara silva because they help to conceptually map what Keating calls "poet-shaman aesthetics, a synergistic combination of artistry, healing, and transformation grounded in relation, and indigenous-inflected world views" (2012, 51). ire'ne lara silva's collection of short stories is a representative example of aesthetics of healing emerging within contemporary Chicana feminist writing. Her collection expresses the very threshold theorizations contemporary Chicana feminist writers are engaging; theorizations that imagine new directions for border arte-as-medicine in Chicana/o literature.

In "duérmete," lara silva presents a borderlands woman who goes by Teré and who has started her life over in a new city. Teré, a middle-aged home health-care nurse, is presented as an ostensible healer at the start of the narrative. Teré's story reflects a mode of labor characteristic of what Maria de la Luz Ibarra refers to as "frontline activism."¹⁴ As a care worker, Teré's labor is comprised of "everyday forms of defense on behalf of [her] elderly patients [that] go unseen and unheard in the broader society" (Ibarra 2013, 448). As lara silva describes Teré's work routine, bedside manner, and intimate interactions with her patients in detail, readers learn that Teré herself is precisely the person who is in need of healing. In fact, as the story unfolds, lara silva establishes that the quasi-divine knowledge over all matters concerning wellness and illness does not automatically belong to Teré by default because she is a certified nurse. Her biomedical expertise does not halt the symptoms of trauma she experiences daily. Teré suffers with insomnia resulting from the trauma of domestic violence at the hands of her ex-husband. Because of her inability to sleep, Teré is off-balance. Her vision blurs, her hands fail her, and she is depicted as alienated

from her own body, routinely waking in the middle of a recurring nightmare in which she belatedly returns in flashbacks to the frightening moments when her husband abused her. lara silva notes that she looked haunted and “there was no magic pill, no medical equipment that could help her sleep” (2013, 10). Teré, who at the beginning of the story functions by the logic of a Western mind-set, suffers belatedly from the experience of patriarchy, physical violence, and emotional abuse. Trauma in lara silva’s representation results from the realization that those whom we love have the capacity to hurt us. However, it is through her interconnectedness, compassion, and sensitivity to her community and her elder patients and their reciprocal openness to her that she ultimately transforms and can heal from the trauma of her ex-husband’s abuse.

lara silva depicts Teré as wounded. Her wounding has forced her to take on an entirely new home outside of Edinburg, a new name to remain hidden from her assailant, and a new profession. Unlike many other health care professionals, lara silva notes that “not long ago she’d been in the hands of unfeeling doctors and calloused nurses and vowed she’d never treat anyone that way” (2013, 56). Indeed, Teré is a unique caregiver because she allows the divide between physician and patient to collapse and responds to her patients with tenderness and compassion each time they engage and care for one another. She ultimately breaks free from the proscriptions of standard Western medicine. Her wounding has indeed built a therapeutic bridge through which she can better connect with her patients as a “frontline activist.” In turn, she engages her patients with deep listening, or what AnaLouise Keating calls, listening with raw openness.¹⁵ It is listening with raw openness that bridges the generational, gendered, physiological, psychological, and spiritual distance between Teré and her patients.

Doña Marta, Teré’s diabetic, disabled, and visually impaired patient, is the catalyst for Teré’s transformation, and her home is a threshold space that Teré

must enter to activate her own healing. Because diabetes disproportionately affects people of Mexican descent, Doña Marta symbolizes the Mexican cultural body. This is why she notes,

The first time she'd seen Doña Marta's house, she recognized it in her bones though it was nothing like her grandmother's houses, or her mother's house. There were flowers blooming everywhere, so many shades of green laid over each other that it seemed a tiny paradise. In time, she'd come to learn the names: *laureles* here, bougainvilleas there, two dark-leaved *mora* trees, *chile pequins* outside the kitchen window, red and yellow roses along the sidewalk, purple sage along the chain link fence, tumbling vines of yellow trumpets along the windows, wild and pale morning glories bursting from anywhere (lara silva 2013, 59).

Doña Marta's house is an Edenic, botanically powerful space that represents the power of curanderismo much like the space lush with romero and quelite in Anzaldúa's poem. It opens up and activates a deep longing within Teré, and it brings forth a set of memories whose origin she attempts to trace through her maternal lineage (lara silva 2013, 59). However, she is unable to recall her connection to this memory because the trauma she has experienced has frightened her soul from her body, fracturing her sense of self. Teré is dealing with a clear case of *susto*. More specifically, Doña Marta's house is a realm whose physical periphery activates a longing to categorize and understand the hidden knowledge and power of each one of the plants and herbs in Doña Marta's garden. Doña Marta's understanding of curanderismo and its vitality is far more developed than Teré's. lara silva confounds the healer/patient intersubjective relationship as a means to radically de-link and transform how we understand healer and healing altogether. lara silva's depiction of Doña Marta's concern and worry over the health of her plants and garden

is revealing because she does not discuss her own medical condition. For instance, when Teré greets her, “Como ha estado? I am glad to see you out of bed,” Doña Marta responds with, “Y mis matitas—are the laureles shiny and green? Do I still have roses by the fence?” (lara silva 2013, 60). Describing Teré’s anecdotal records, lara silva writes Teré’s “first notes on Doña Marta had been simple: seventy-five years old, a stroke the year before, diabetic, her left foot recently amputated, advanced diabetic retinopathy had left her almost blind” (2013, 63). Yet, Doña Marta is more concerned with the health of her plants than with her own illnesses and treatments.

Therefore, Doña Marta defies logic as she is a complex character Teré does not readily understand. For example, inquiring about her medical history, in one revealing scene, Teré questions Doña Marta about the time doctors originally diagnosed her with diabetes. Doña Marta responds with, “Mis comadres said it came from so many sustos—a bad car accident, the sick children, my two husbands dying the way they did” (lara silva 2013, 63). Interestingly, Doña Marta disarticulates her understanding of her own illness from definitions conferred through Western biomedicine, and instead defers to the understanding of her illness given by the explanations of the women within her community. She understands her diabetes as the result of the losses she had experienced throughout her life namely, her ongoing struggles with *susto*.¹⁶ All of this in a clinical setting could warrant reproach and correction from a health care professional, but Teré seeks instead to engage Doña Marta on her terms and in doing so allows herself to be led by Doña Marta’s wisdom and understanding.

Accordingly, Teré slowly begins to make sense of Doña Marta’s wisdom and her uncanny ability to see. Doña Marta who is visually impaired sees not through her physical eyes in the empirical sense, but through other means. In fact, in spite of her retinopathy Doña Marta sees Teré has been up all night in crises.

She says, “Pos Teré, I can see it on your face. You had one of your dreams again. Tell me what happened” (lara silva 2013, 67). lara silva notes that, “Teré smiled a small smile” and replied, “You know me too well, Doña Marta” (2013, 67). Through this narrative, lara silva questions rational empiricism by delinking true knowledge from measurable evidence or objective truth. Doña Marta is able to see and know Teré without relying on her “sightless eyes” (2013, 72). Indeed, she intuitively senses Teré’s pain and lara silva lyrically depicts their intimate bond. Doña Marta knows about Teré’s nights spent “. . . taking hot baths because she couldn’t sleep. These nights remembering the bruises and the blood. [Teré’s] whole body pulsed dark blue with tears. [Teré] could barely stand to live inside her body sometimes” (2013, 67). Doña Marta, concerned for Teré’s well-being, tells her, “. . . you’re hurting yourself, keeping all your wounds open” (lara silva 2013, 68). This is particularly important because Doña Marta locates Teré’s trauma and her ability to heal herself within Teré’s own body in one sentence. Doña Marta not only recognizes her trauma, she enables Teré to do so also and reminds her of her own agency and capacity to become her own healer. As Suzanne Bost notes,

Pain, illness and disability are assumed to represent corporeal failure because they challenge our standards of how bodies should work, look, and feel. Yet these very same qualities usually assumed to be negative also have positive (theoretical and political) implications. Illness links individuals with others (including caregivers and those with shared suffering). . . . (2010, 5).

Doña Marta understands that life itself inevitably extends a calling to all of us to become healers. This calling is bound to the fact that we can all experience wounding, illness, or trauma. By connecting with Teré, Doña Marta activates Teré’s capacity to self-heal holistically.

Next, *lara silva* departs from the conventions of literary realism and, through her prose, enacts a Chicana feminist aesthetic of healing.

This unique aesthetic is guided by a relational metaphysics [that] includes an ethics of interconnectedness and dynamic theories of language.... If, as Anzaldúa suggests, we are radically interrelated with all existence, then anything we write, say, or do—no matter how insignificant it seems—exceeds us and holds the potential to affect human and nonhuman worlds (Keating 2012, 63).

Indeed, Doña Marta's words and teachings do just that for Teré. A day later, Teré wakes suddenly with a sense of urgency and races to Doña Marta's house. Teré sees that Doña Marta fell and injured herself in an effort to care for her garden. Arriving at Doña Marta's house, she sees "The old woman . . . lying on the ground, her hip lodged against porch steps, her hands still clenching weeds" (*lara silva* 2013, 71). Weak and moments away from dying, Doña Marta imparts one final lesson as she describes her ostensibly dead garden. Doña Marta notes, "Even this garden is not dead. There are still seeds, *mi'ja*, and strong roots" and only after making this declaration, she dies in Teré's arms (*lara silva* 2013, 72). Like Anzaldúa, *lara silva* enacts border-arte-as-medicine by imbuing healing through culturally specific rituals that defy borders between people and by insisting on a politics of remembering.

This is when Teré crosses a radical threshold and *ire'ne lara silva's* narrative departs from Chicana literary realism. Guided by a dream, Teré knows that she must become the healer of her own wounds and knows just how to do so. Spiritually inclined, she follows a ritual presented to her in her dreams. She knew that she must collect Doña Marta's amputated leg bones and take them and Doña Marta's corpse to the ocean for a final ocean-side ritual. This ritual,

one can assume, is unlike any other sanctioned healing practice she performed as a home health-care nurse. *lara silva* writes,

The body was light in her arms. In the silence of cicadas and crickets and branches swaying, Teré carried the body away from the house, away from asphalt, away from the city streets and city lights, carrying the body towards the sound of the ocean. The sun hadn't risen. There was only silence and stillness. Time melted away (2013, 73).

The “branches swaying” above the body and the movement away from “asphalt” and the built form of the city into a realm marked by the dissolution of time suggest a reconnection to a spiritually charged moment before trauma has occurred. This movement away from time and space as we know it vis-à-vis a healing ritual signals to the reader that a *limpia* ritual is underway. Once Teré arrives at the ocean with Doña Marta's lifeless body and amputated bones under the light of the moon, “The flesh fell away, relieved of the need to cling to the bone. Calluses fell away, scars fell away, and the varicose veins fell away. All burdens fell away” (*lara silva* 2013, 73). The “calluses,” “scars,” and “varicose veins” are all markers that indexed her gendered labor. Together, each marking on her flesh testifies in equal parts to her body's vulnerability, and resiliency, and in a final *limpia* ritual, Teré appears to have ritually cleansed the markings away. Doña Marta has physically shed the boundaries of her flesh and has gone beyond the confines of her skin. What remains in place of her marked flesh, are pictographic glyphs written on Doña Marta's bones. *lara silva* notes,

. . . there were marks, soft interweaving circles, lines and patterns gleaming brightly on the pale bones. Glyphs covered every inch, bearing witness to the old woman's life. Pictographs that left nothing unsaid; years of work and struggle and illness etching deep diagonal

lines; longing, grief, and loss spiraling around and around each bone; bruises and joys bursting like blooms. . . . Even when the flesh that had borne so much fell away, the bones remembered (2013, 73).

Teré is able to read the inscriptions that life has patterned onto Doña Marta's bones. When Teré witnessed the glyphic writing, her own bones "remembered." Teré is finally set free from her own alienation and can sleep. She heals from the trauma of domestic violence by picking up the "thorns from the huisache" and performing a *limpia* ritual on Doña Marta, thereby integrating both herself and Doña Marta into perfect balance. This transformative ritual performed after Doña Marta's unexpected death challenges our commonsense logic of healing and of healers. Healing Doña Marta, in turn, heals Teré. In this moment, *lara silva* also allows Teré to see that the same luminescent writing she saw on Doña Marta's bones is written inside her as well. This writing is a non-alphabetic script, a writing that reveals the primacy of their interconnectedness and crosses Teré and Doña Marta into another epistemic and spiritual register. Teré looks down at her own flesh and describes the following:

Her own spirals and glyphs shining outward from the bone. Her own scars transformed into something else. Wonderingly, she traced each line, each shadow with her fingers. Her skin felt the same, smooth and warm. It seemed as if her body should feel alien—or hurt. But it didn't hurt. And now, with her bones glowing through her flesh, she felt more alive inside her body than she had ever felt. This body was wholly hers, with its memories and its scars and its surviving. Her body had survived, healed, grown strong again. She had survived, healed, grown strong again. She stood straight and walked to the bed (*lara silva* 2013, 75).

Teré's encounter with Doña Marta's body was spiritually healing and transformative. Because Doña Marta died clutching some of her plants, it is unclear who actually began the *limpia* ritual. All the same, Lara Silva's narrative healing comes about through a compassionate exchange and a willingness to care for and connect with an elder. Their inter-subjective relations, their desire to listen to each other's stories, and their mutual concern for one another, taken together, enable Teré to remember how to fashion healing and wholeness for herself and for Doña Marta.

Remedios: Countering the Susto of Neoliberal Trauma

The present global neoliberal economy breeds illness. The extreme poverty, and structural inequality now recognized as the hallmarks of globalization make the World Health Organization's assertion that 450 million people globally already have a mental health issue unsurprising. For this reason, it is important now more than ever to think closely about the way *curanderismo* and spiritual activism continue to be aestheticized in Chicana/o literature, especially the new ways in which border artists insist upon fashioning stories fundamentally structured by announcing the importance of *curanderismo* as a means to aid us in our decolonial processes of self-healing. Anzaldúa reminds us that,

Because we use metaphors as well as hierbitas or curing stones to effect changes, we follow in the tradition of the shaman. Like the shaman, we transmit information from our consciousness to the physical body of another. If we are lucky, we create like the shaman images that induce altered states of consciousness conducive to self-healing. . . . From our own and our people's experiences, we will try to create images and metaphors that will give us a handle on the numinous, a handle on the faculty for self-healing, one that may cure the depressed spirit, the frightened soul (2009, 122).

Transformation will continue to remain at the forefront of Chicana feminist theory and at the forefront of the narratives we call our own. Inflected by the diversity of Chicana/o experience, these stories matter. They matter now more than ever because the U.S. economy is increasingly globalizing privatized trade and, therefore, globalizing *susto*. Here, our understanding of illness and of healing must shift to recognize the ways larger forces make us structurally vulnerable to illness and trauma. The quasi-divine status, which is by default granted to the market in the era of globalization, threatens all life on our planet. In this age, corporate interests rule, and too often the opening of borders takes place only as a means of locating spaces and bodies available for exploitation. The expansion of deregulated trade, the push for privatization and the mythic narrative that “free competition” fosters liberty have serious global consequences for us all. An economic climate where the United States trades the “public good” and “communal-mindedness” for “individual freedom” and where social Darwinism and *laissez-faire* capitalism pass as democracy is not sustainable. Post-Movement Chicana narratives such as those written by Gloria Anzaldúa and ire’ne lara silva enact border-arte-as-medicine even as their narratives imagine a space for us to think of one’s spiritual health as inseparably tied to our physical well-being. Above all else, Chicana writers remind us that we have always had the capacity to heal ourselves, and an ability to help to heal one another. Chicana/o letters have the potential to take us beyond the confines of our skin through border art-as-medicine and in new ways that can inform the ethics and politics needed for decolonial healing in the era of neoliberalism.

Acknowledgments

I owe much appreciation to the anonymous reviewers of this journal who gave insightful feedback. I am also grateful for the comments I received at the MALCS 2016 Summer Institute. Warm thanks to Kallie Rolfe for much

needed assistance. Thanks to José Aranda and to Nicole Waligora-Davis for their support and mil gracias to Elizabeth Farfan-Santos for her consejos. A special thanks to Roberto J. Tejada for graciously providing a “room of my own” from which to work.

References

- Allen, Paula Gunn. 1998. *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing Loose Cannons*. Boston: Beacon Press
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute.
- . 2002. “(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces.” In *This Bridge We Call Home* edited by AnaLouise Keating, 1–5. New York: Routledge.
- . 2009. “Border Arte: Nepantla, el lugar de la frontera.” In *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, edited by AnaLouise Keating, 176–186. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2015a. “Flights of the Imagination: Rereading/Rewriting Realities.” In *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, edited by AnaLouise Keating, 23–46. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2015b. “Let Us Be the Healing of the Wound: The Coyolxauhqui Imperative—*la sombra y el sueño*.” In *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, edited by AnaLouise Keating, 9–22. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bost, Suzanne. 2010. *Encarnación: Illness and Chicana Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Literature*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Brett, Guy. 1990. *Transcontinental: An Investigation of Reality: Nine Latin American Artists*. New York: Verso.
- Carlsen, Laura. “Under NAFTA Mexico Suffered and the United States Felt Its Pain.” *New York Times*, November 24, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com.roomfordebate/2013/11/24/what-weve-learned-from-nafta/under-nafta-mexico-suffered-and-the-united-states-felt-its-pain>.
- Cutler, John Alba. 2015. *End of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Facio, Elisa, and Irene Lara, eds. 2014. *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women’s Lives*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Gonzales, Patrisia. 2012. *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Hartley, George. 2010. “The Curandera of Conquest: Gloria Anzaldúa’s Decolonial Remedy.” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 35 (1): 135–161.

- Hernández-Avila, Inés. 2005. "Tierra tremenda: The Earth's Agony and Ecstasy in the Work of Gloria Anzaldúa." In *Entre/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, edited by Ana Louise Keating, 233–240. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holmes, Christina. 2016. *Ecological Borderlands: Body, Nature, and Spirit in Chicana Feminism*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Ibarra, Maria de la Luz. 2013. "Frontline Activists: Mexicana Care Workers, Subjectivity, and the Defense of the Elderly." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 27 (3): 434–452.
- Keating, AnaLouise. 2005. *Entre mundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2008. "I am a Citizen of the Universe": Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change." *Feminist Studies* 34 (1/2): 53–69.
- . 2012. "Speculative Realism, Visionary Pragmatism, and Poet-Shamanic Aesthetics in Gloria Anzaldúa—and Beyond." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40 (3/4): 51–69.
- . 2013. *Transformation Now! Toward a Post-Operational Politics of Change*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- lara silva, ire'ne. 2013. *Flesh to Bone*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute.
- Lugones, María. 2010. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 25 (4): 742–759.
- Montoya, Michael. 2011. *Making the Mexican Diabetic: Race, Science, and the Genetics of Inequality*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Morales, Aurora Levins. 2001. *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas*. Cambridge: South End Press.
- Osler, William. 1904. *Aequanimitas: With Other Addresses to Medical Students, Nurses and Practitioners of Medicine*. Philadelphia: P. Blackston's Son and Co.
- Pacheco, Marcelo E. 2013. "Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel: Two Extinct Creations." In *Antonio Berni: Juanito and Ramona*, edited by Héctor Olea and Mari Carmen Ramírez, 21–29. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Pérez, Laura E. 2007. *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Solis Ybarra, Priscilla. 2016. *Writing the Good Life: Mexican American Literature and the Environment*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Notes

- ¹ I am specifically invoking the terms "palliative, therapeutic, and restorative" as a metaphorical way of marking the social, political, and cultural effects Chicana feminism has on productions of

knowledge across disciplines, as well as across various cultural practices, including but not limited to healthcare practices. Healing work in this essay specifically includes a wide array of practices by which Chicana feminists themselves and those guided by Chicana feminist thought are able to locate, remediate, and traverse the various divides existing amongst Chicana/o people. It is important to make note of the interventions and impact of women of color as contributing to this healing work. Women of color interventions in academia have and continue to be praised for significantly traversing and moving “. . . beyond the critical bound[aries] set in Western academic circles. . . .” (Allen 1998, 166).

² AnaLouise Keating specifically makes reference to Anzaldúa’s “metaphysics of interconnectedness” as a framework that enables her to recognize the common ground shared amongst people. Drawing from Keating’s work, interconnectedness in this essay is the shared space of connection and commonality that exists beyond the divides imposed by identity categories or positions of power (Keating 2008).

³ It is important to mention that there is extant robust cross-disciplinary scholarship that does not eschew matters of the spirit but instead foregrounds spirituality, spiritual practice, and spiritual healing within critical frameworks that analyze cultural expression and cultural practices including but certainly not limited to the scholarly works of Laura Pérez, Theresa Delgadillo, Patrisia Gonzales, C. Róman-Odio, Lara Medina, Inés Hernández Avila, AnaLouise Keating, Irene Lara and Eliza Facio.

⁴ By “susto,” I refer to the adverse belated experience of trauma, fear, or illness understood by *curanderismo* as accompanying spirit loss, or soul loss.

⁵ See Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986); Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991); María Amparo Escandón’s *Gonzalez Daughter Trucking Co.: A Road Novel with Literary License* (2005).

⁶ Gloria E. Anzaldúa expressed her particular fondness for Juan Dávila’s oil painting titled *Wuthering Heights*, which depicts Juanito Laguna, a half-caste, mixed breed transvestite with an injured left leg. See Anzaldúa (2009).

⁷ Davila’s work critiques regimes of European hegemony and the framing of Latin American art as primitive and exotic. According to Guy Brett, many of Juan Dávila’s paintings “concern themselves with a power struggle. They can be seen as a translation of the persistent inequalities of the world and the histories of colonialism into the era of the ‘global market of images’ drawing battle-lines in the complexity and confusion of transnational communications” (Bret 1990, 107).

⁸ Marking the path of destruction cut by NAFTA into Mexico is the heavily subsidized importation of corn into Mexico. See Carlsen (2013).

⁹ I use the term “mind/body/spirit” in this essay to typographically account for diverse ontological frameworks that theorize being. Here, the forward slashes are meant to connote the separate realms or separation between mind and body and spirit imposed by frameworks such as Cartesian Dualism, while at the same time it simultaneously presents an alternative understanding of being as always already complex and holistically imbricated.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that “romero” is commonly employed by curanderos/as in Baño de Romero rituals and other limpia rituals throughout the Americas. This is why in describing the herb Aurora Levíns Morales notes in *Remedios: Stories from Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas*: “Romero says everything is present, everyone is here. That which is lost is not lost after all” (2001, 67).

¹¹ For a fuller account of traditional healing practices, see Patricia Gonzalez’s *Red Medicine*, wherein she details how “plants have guided her at crucial times” (Gonzales 2012, 18). See also Aurora Levíns Morales *Remedios: Stories from Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas*, which details cultural/personal healing and makes a case for the medicinal power of history.

¹² Keating notes, “According to Anzaldúa, the spiritual, material, physical, and psychic are inseparable aspects of a unified infinitely complex reality” (Keating 2015, xxx).

¹³ It is worth stating that Mexican American letters maintain significant engagement with environmental thinking. For two recent works emerging from the intersection of environmental thought and Chicana feminism, see Solis Ybarra (2016) and Holmes (2016).

¹⁴ Maria de la Luz Ibarra’s ethnographic study provides insight into the way Mexicana caregivers “invoke something better” and in doing so refute standard models of care in the U.S. Ibarra’s study explores how Mexicanas in diaspora are leading the struggle to “humanize care” in Santa Barbara by integrating “love, intimacy, and dignity for patients and for themselves.” Ibarra’s work is of significance here because it qualitatively documents the often-unseen lived material dynamics taking place in the world outside of the text, dynamics that ire’ne lara silva’s short story “duérmete” aestheticizes through her characters Teré and Doña Marta. See Ibarra (2013).

¹⁵ AnaLouise Keating describes this form of listening as a form of spiritual activism. She writes, “Like other forms of spiritual activism, listening with raw openness begins with the belief in our interrelatedness, with the willingness to posit and seek commonalities—commonalities defined not as sameness but possible points of connection” (Keating 2005, 250).

¹⁶ *Making the Mexican Diabetic: Race, Science, and the Genetics of Inequality* makes an effort to study the complex ecosocial dynamics and linkages between racism biology and health by examining the role of “social hardship toxic exposure verbal and physical threats, unhealthy consumer messages and substandard medical care. . .” and its effect on health. (Montoya 2011, 89).