

WRITING (ABOUT) ANZALDÚA, INTRODUCING THIS BOOK

In rewriting narratives of identity, nationalism, ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality, and aesthetics, I attempt to show (and not just tell) how transformation happens. My job is not just to interpret or describe realities but to create them through language and action, symbols and images. My task is to guide readers and give them the space to co-create, often against the grain of culture, family, and ego injunctions, against external and internal censorship, against the dictates of genes. From infancy our cultures induct us into the semi-trance state of ordinary consciousness, into being in agreement with the people around us, into believing that this is the way things are. It is extremely difficult to shift out of this trance.—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*

This book offers an in-depth investigation of the theories and philosophy developed by Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (1942–2004). A versatile author, Anzaldúa published in a variety of genres: prose, poetry, short stories, hybrid autobiographical narratives, interviews, children's books, monographs, and multigenre edited collections. In addition to her published writings, Anzaldúa produced an enormous amount of unpublished material, including both partial and finished drafts of fiction, poetry, narrative, theory, and much more. As will become evident in what follows, this unpublished material is an overwhelmingly rich source of data with which we can more

fully understand, work with, and apply Anzaldúa's philosophy. (And, as you'll see, "overwhelming" could be the operative word here: Anzaldúa's prolific, generative writing has bequeathed to us a startling, almost endless, abundance of material and ideas with which to work.) Because her philosophy intentionally and effectively challenges what, in the above epigraph, she calls "the semi-trance state of ordinary consciousness"—the status-quo reality in which we're immersed—it offers vital tools with which we can transform the world. Anzaldúa invites us to enter her intimate philosophical space and, through this invitation, emboldens us to draw on imagination and other alternative ways of thinking (and feeling) in order to "co-create" with her. As explained later in more detail, this deep-seated challenge can make Anzaldúa's work uniquely compelling.

As one of the first openly lesbian Chicana authors, Anzaldúa played a major role in exposing (and transforming) status-quo definitions of Chicana/o, queer, and female identities. And as editor or co-editor of three groundbreaking multicultural, multigenre feminist anthologies, she played an equally crucial role in shaping western (especially US) definitions of feminism, challenging limited approaches to multiculturalism, and developing inclusive movements for social justice. Although she worked outside the formal university system (except for occasional teaching engagements, academic conference "speaking gigs," and several stints in graduate school), Anzaldúa significantly (and permanently) impacted many academic fields, including but not limited to American studies, Chicana/o studies, composition studies, cultural studies, ethnic studies, literary studies, LGBTQ studies, and women's and gender studies. She has also permanently impacted feminist and queer theory (though too often her contributions to the latter are downplayed), and I predict that her impact on disability studies, esoteric studies, religious studies, and philosophy will continue to grow throughout this century. Her writings have been translated into many languages and excerpted in hundreds of anthologies.¹ And, as the development of the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa demonstrates, her words speak to a wide range of people located inside, outside, and straddling the academy: intellectuals, artists, educators, healers, social justice activists, and others from a wide range of social and geographic locations find Anzaldúa's work to be inspiring and transformational. Through the pages, across the years, within the metaphors, Anzaldúa's words find their way into the bodies, hearts, and minds of many. (Although this last statement might sound a bit corny, it attests to the feedback I've consistently received, as people from many locations marvel

at the impact of Anzaldúa's words on their psyches, spirits, and/or lives. It also corresponds beautifully to my opening epigraph, in which Anzaldúa asserts that her task is to give readers "the space to co-create"; I contend that this space begins within the individual, expanding [us] out into the world.)

I have written this book for these people, and for Anzaldúa herself. I want her work to become even better known; I want readers to recognize, access, and apply the breadth of her theories, to more fully appreciate the generative potential of her words, and to become personally and collectively empowered through (and by) the process. For years, I've wondered why her sophisticated theories and powerful writing were not more fully studied and better known. Sure, many people (especially in ethnic, women's, and feminist studies) are aware of her work, but many in other academic disciplines are not. My goal with this book is to help Anzaldúa's work become even more widely respected, available, applied, and in other ways used. I want to give her work a hand, so to speak. (*Indeed, this desire inspired my book's title: The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook.*)

More specifically, I have five interrelated goals: (1) to offer an in-depth, expansive genealogical understanding of Anzaldúa's theories and the contextual/biographical dimensions of her work; (2) to encourage a more extensive engagement with a wide range of Anzaldúa's published and unpublished writings and to provide readers with additional tools to facilitate this engagement; (3) to explore (and build on) Anzaldúa's dialogic method, so that we might more fully appreciate, work with, and apply it; (4) to share what I've learned with others, so that they (you) might take the work even further; and, thus, (5) to develop and showcase an innovative approach to decolonial wisdom traditions and "doing" theory. I aspire to broaden and deepen Anzaldúan scholarship, shifting the conversation in new directions while underscoring the visionary yet pragmatic social justice dimensions of her work. And, because Anzaldúa brought innovation, imagination, and spirit into her philosophical worldview and theory creation, I have tried to do the same. I offer an investigation that, like Anzaldúa herself, challenges the academic status quo and "the semi-trance state of ordinary consciousness."

While some of Anzaldúa's theories (particularly those of the borderlands, the new mestiza, and mestiza consciousness, as presented in *Borderlands/La Frontera*) have received much well-deserved scholarly attention over the years, and other theories (like *conocimiento*, *nepantla*, and spiritual activism) have received increased attention in the twenty-first century,

still other theories (like autohistoria and autohistoria-teoría, nos/otras, new tribalism, geographies of selves, and El Mundo Zurdo) have received less attention, although scholarly interest in them continues to grow.² The over-emphasis on select theories is not surprising, given that they're easily accessible in Anzaldúa's published work while other theories are most fully articulated in unpublished writings. (*That said, I can't help but wonder: How might Anzaldúa's use of Spanish to name many of her theories have hindered some scholars—especially those unfamiliar with Spanish—in engaging deeply with her work? Does the provocative nature of some theories inhibit theorists' explorations, leading them to pay most attention to those that seem "safer"?*) However, as I demonstrate in what follows, these lesser-studied theories are crucial for those readers hoping to understand the development of Anzaldúa's thinking, the complexity of her work, and its relevance for contemporary life. By investigating those dimensions of Anzaldúa's theories, writings, and methods that have received less critical attention and by exploring the interconnections between these overlooked concepts and Anzaldúa's better-known theories, this book opens additional areas of investigation, offers new entry into Anzaldúa's thought, and models additional ways to "do" Anzaldúan theory.

Key to this in-depth investigation has been my years-long engagement with Anzaldúa's archives, especially her enormous (*overwhelming*) collection of manuscript drafts and writing notas.³ Indeed, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, Anzaldúa's stunning collection is her most complex, contradictory, and open-ended text (*or, perhaps, texts*)—filled with intimate, unexpected glimpses into Anzaldúa's worlds. As Suzanne Bost notes, this unfinished archival text challenges and, at times, upends scholars' most cherished ideas about Anzaldúa and her work. (*I'm so excited for you to accompany me on this deep dive into Anzaldúa's archives!*) For over half a decade, I've immersed myself in Anzaldúa's manuscripts in order to track her writing process, understand her complex theory-creation method, trace the synergistic development of key theories, and more fully comprehend her overarching philosophical framework. In the following pages, I share my discoveries with you. When I drafted my proposal for this project, I planned to showcase my own thinking, to offer analyses and applications of Anzaldúa's theories, creating a conventional academic book (*a "monograph" on Anzaldúa*). However, the more deeply I dove into her theories, the less closely I followed my original plan. Anzaldúa's manuscripts upended my project, inviting (*compelling!*) me to change tracks, to focus more

closely on the theories themselves, rather than on my personal insights, analyses, and applications.

And yet, I could not remove myself entirely from this study: not only would the adoption of an objective voice be duplicitous (*because we're all, by virtue of our time in these human bodies, subjective, partial, and biased*), but Anzaldúa herself would have strongly critiqued this pseudo-objectivity (*and haunted my dreams*). Since the early 1990s, she has encouraged me to put myself into my writing, to include my voice and perspective (*not in a Look-at-me! Look-at-what-I-can-do! kind of way but rather in a dialogic, co-creative approach*) as I explore and interact with her work. And so, to honor Anzaldúa's guidance while foregrounding *her* work, I've used parentheses and italics to earmark the most subjective (*opinionated, and/or provocative*) statements. Spending so much time over the years with Anzaldúa and her work has enriched my own scholarship and emboldened my voice. With her guidance, I've learned to dive deeply into my inner wisdom, encountering there what she theorized as *el cenote*.⁴ She has created the path, inviting and encouraging me to dive deeply and, through this deep-diving excavation, to risk the personal in startling ways.

Risking the Personal

I've designed this book to generate new dialogues and conversations that will enrich Anzaldúan scholarship (*and the experiences of other Anzaldúa readers*) in at least three interrelated ways: First, I foreground the personal, defined broadly to include both individually and culturally specific elements, both psychic and physical experiences. Throughout her career, in theory and practice, Anzaldúa emphasized the importance of incorporating the personal into the written word. And when I say "the personal," I mean the intimate personal, the shameful personal, the details about ourselves that we tend to hide—even from ourselves. Anzaldúa's use of the personal goes so far beyond that conventional feminist slogan ("the personal is the political") that I developed a theory, "risking the personal," to understand and describe it. As I explained in my introduction to Anzaldúa's edited collection of interviews, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, throughout her work (and in conversation), Anzaldúa

draws extensively on her own life—her early menstruation; her campesino background; her childhood in the Rio Grande Valley of South

Texas; her experiences as a brown-skinned, Spanish-speaking girl in a dominant culture that values light-skinned, English-speaking boys; and her sexual and spiritual desires, to mention only a few of the many private issues woven into her words. And you'll find this same willingness to risk the personal—to disclose intimate details, beliefs, and emotions—taken to a further extreme throughout the interviews collected in this volume. The risks are real, as Anzaldúa exposes intimate details about her life, her beliefs, and her desires. (“Risking” 2)

When I first wrote these words I believed that Anzaldúa's main purpose in risking the personal was to make profound connections with readers. By diving so deeply into her own life, and by sharing her deepest, most secret insights and desires with others, she invites us into her worlds, so that we might connect deeply with her: “By incorporating her own life into her work, Anzaldúa transforms herself into a bridge and creates potential identifications with readers from diverse backgrounds. She models a process of self-disclosure which invites (and sometimes compels) us to take new risks as we reflect on our own experiences, penetrate the privacy of our own lives” (2).

After having spent two more decades with Anzaldúa and her work, exploring her theory-making process in all its messy chaotic detail, I now believe that risking the personal is even more complex and thoughtful than I'd previously assumed. In part, this shift comes simply from the extra time I've spent with Anzaldúa and her manuscripts. But also, after deeply exploring her theories of *el cenote*, *conocimiento*, and *nepantla*, I recognize the philosophical framework (including, especially, what I've named her metaphysics of radical interconnectedness) that undergirds this method. More specifically, Anzaldúa's metaphysics of radical interconnectedness posits that each individual (*both human and more-than-human*) is interrelated with all existence: personhood does not stop with our skin, our individual self-enclosed identity, our simple life (birth date, history, and so on). Rather, we are each a walking representation/expression of spirit, linked at psychic subterranean levels with all others (*and “other” here exceeds and precedes the human*). This interrelatedness ensures that, when we dive deeply (*and boldly*) into our own psyches to access new insights, we discover/receive insights that resonate powerfully with others.

Risking the personal is multidimensional and key to Anzaldúa's method of knowledge creation for herself, as well as her readers. By diving so very

deeply into her own life, and by engaging dialogically with everything (*and everyone*) she encountered, Anzaldúa opened herself to the cosmos and enacted theory-building conversations. As I explain in chapter 1, risking the personal is not about self-elevation, solipsistic navel-gazing, or confessional self-expression. It is, rather, a vehicle for intimate engagement with readers. Intense excavation into the most personal dimensions of her life is part of Anzaldúa's method: diving deeply into her own psyche, and beyond, into *el cenote*, she arrives at insights and creates knowledge that profoundly impacts our lives.

This book honors Anzaldúa's emphasis on the personal in other ways as well: in addition to exploring her theories of *autohistoria* and *autohistoria-teoría* (which, as explained later in more detail, are intimately concerned with the personal), I draw on biographical events in Anzaldúa's life, my own extensive interactions with Anzaldúa, and my experiences editing her work to complicate and deepen this investigation of Anzaldúan theory and to offer new insights into her writing and theorizing process. (*And here, I guess you could say, I, too, risk the personal—both my own personal and Anzaldúa's, as I showcase some of our weirdest, least rational experiences and beliefs. As a very private person, I find these risks quite challenging.*)

This book foregrounds Anzaldúa's unpublished writings, which are incredibly extensive (*and often highly—indeed, almost unbelievably—personal*). A perfectionist, Anzaldúa produced multiple drafts of each published piece and left a vast range of unpublished material—including both partial and completed (but never published) projects.⁵ These unpublished manuscripts offer intimate entry into Anzaldúa's mind, illuminating her philosophy and method. I've drawn on this material, putting it into dialogue with her published work to offer new insights into her process; to model an archival research method with important implications for Anzaldúan studies (and for other archival studies—particularly those focused on women-of-colors⁶ authors); and to uncover additional dimensions of her theories (including, for instance, the shift from the Medusa state to the Coatlicue state; the interrelationships among her epistemological theories of *la facultad*, new *mestiza* consciousness, *nepantla*, and *conocimiento*; and the origins of her theory of spiritual activism). I have spent almost two decades immersed in Anzaldúa's unpublished writings, and in this book I share much (*but not all*) of what I've learned. I want others to benefit from my efforts, to learn from my mistakes, and in other ways to build on what I offer. (*And throughout the following chapters, I provide suggestions for ways to do so.*)

I showcase the rich multiplicity, the wild diversity, and the generative potential in Anzaldúa's work. I want this book to increase scholarly and activist engagement with Anzaldúa's theories; open new directions in Anzaldúan scholarship; model additional forms that critical thinking, literary analysis, and theorizing can take; and transform our approach to scholarship. In short, I've written the book that I wanted to read years ago: a book that takes risks, that dives deeply into Anzaldúa's intimate beliefs (including the metaphysical, psychic, and esoteric), that looks at Anzaldúa's intense, highly political engagement with spirit, that acknowledges Anzaldúa's provocative perspectives on identity—and that does this work, and more, with intellectual humility. I wanted a book that could help me make sense of Anzaldúa's tortuously recursive writing process, a book I could share with my students and others—with anyone interested in learning more about Anzaldúa, her theories, and/or themselves. I wanted an accessible book—a book that didn't rely on overly elite theoretical language (*though, as I discuss in chapter 2 and as Anzaldúa notes in "haciendo caras," there's a place and a time for "high" theory*). I wanted a book with legs, a book that would inspire us to do additional work. A profound, practical, energizing book.

Mapping This Book's Trajectory: An Overview

This book is divided into three parts. Part I, "Prelude to Theorizing: Contexts and Methods," includes three chapters offering a framework with which to more fully understand the origins, depth, and breadth of Anzaldúan theories. No one writes in a vacuum. Our bodies, our surroundings, all the minutia of our lives, and so much more subtly (*and not so subtly*) shape whatever we produce. This obvious fact is doubly (*or TRIPLY*) true in the case of Anzaldúa, who risked the personal—constantly and in startling ways. She dove deeply into the stuff of her own life, metaphorically ripping open her heart to and for her writing.⁷ To more fully understand the development of Anzaldúa's theories and unique perspectives, we must understand her life—at least, in part. (*And here I emphasize the partiality of our understanding. To presume we could ever understand the totality of another's life [or even our own] is hubris.*) Chapter 1, "Risking the Personal, Redux: A Biographical-Intellectual Sketch," offers a biographical overview to assist readers in situating the theories in the life and the life in the theories, expanding your appreciation for both. As the title suggests, this exploration

of Anzaldúa's life focuses especially on her thought; although intimate, it's not exhaustive. It's a sketch: neither a portrait, nor a mural.

Writing was central to Anzaldúa; it was her destiny and vocation. As she asserts in her unpublished writing notas, "I write . . . to create a new reality. I write because it's my calling, my task to do in the world. I write. It is a ritual, a habit, a propensity bred in my bones. . . . I write because I like to think on paper. I write because I like to think, and to track my thoughts. I write because I want to leave a discernable mark on the world" (Writing Notas G). Chapter 2, "Writing as Ritual, Habit, Mission, Partner, and Joy: Anzaldúa's Writing Process," dives deeply into Anzaldúa's relationship to writing, focusing especially on its intuitive, collective, creative, metaphysical dimensions. Like many authors, Anzaldúa did not proceed in linear fashion, from fully developed idea to logically organized outline to completed essay. She generated her ideas as she wrote, and the writing process was, itself, a co-creator of the theories—a co-author of sorts. As she explains in a 1991 interview, "I discover what I'm trying to say as the writing progresses" (*Interviews* 174). Anzaldúa often began a new project (whether story, essay, or poem) with a question, a personal experience, an urgent need, an intuitive hunch, or an emotional gesture; conducting what I call "oracular research," she worked through these seedling ideas as she wrote and revised, and she did so in ways only partially under her conscious control. Through this radically recursive process, the words took on lives of their own, morphing in ways that often (*perhaps almost always*) surprised Anzaldúa herself. In short, she learned as she wrote; she developed her ideas as she revised. And for Anzaldúa, revision was endless. In chapter 2, I draw from my analyses of her manuscripts and her published discussions of writing, as well as my experiences working with her, to offer an overview of her writing process. (*Anzaldúa's process both mirrors and has shaped my own, especially concerning this book, which has truly taken on a life of its own, growing into a format quite different from what I set out to produce.*)

Anzaldúa's creative process emerged from and was anchored in her relational worldview—her metaphysics of radical interconnectedness. Whether writing poetry, short stories, narratives, essays, or other prose, she did so within a dialogic framework that was multilayered, recursive, and relational. Anzaldúan theory emerged in conversation with Anzaldúa's life, shaped by her physical circumstances, events, and contexts at that time, or what I call *situational engines*: factors, forces, and environments that initiated and/or directed (but did not entirely control) the theory's

development. Chapter 3, “How the Theories Emerged: Haciendo teorías con Gloria,” explores these situational engines, as well as Anzaldúa’s complex relationship to theory and the act of theorizing (both inside and outside higher education). Each Anzaldúan theory was shaped by the specific contexts and events of her life at that particular time: the profound drive to be a writer; the urge to create; the need to earn a living; the struggles (*and joys*) of embodied existence (*including very early, extremely painful menstruation; short stature; dark skin; insomnia; type 1 diabetes and its cascading impacts; and much more*); the friends and people around her; the ideas Anzaldúa encountered in books, school, trees, water, and the beyond-human world; intellectual trends of the day; external local, national, and international political events; invitations to write and/or speak on a specific topic; funding opportunities; and so on.

With background and context firmly established, part II, “The Theories Themselves,” focuses on eighteen key Anzaldúan theories. Like many scholars, I first read Anzaldúan theory as though each arrived into the world fully developed and thus as somewhat static. However, this assumption (*and approach*) is too limited (*and limiting*). After having spent so much time working with Anzaldúa—both in person and in spirit—I’ve realized that each theory emerged slowly over time, taking unexpected shifts, breaks, detours, and departures. To share what I’ve learned through my multiyear analysis, part II consists of one lengthy chapter (chapter 4), broken into eighteen subchapters, each offering an overview and genealogy of an Anzaldúan theory: autohistoria and autohistoria-teoría, borderlands, el cenote, the Coatlicue state, conocimiento, the Coyolxauhqui process, desconocimiento(s), la facultad, geographies of selves, El Mundo Zurdo, la naguala, nepantla, nepantleras, new mestiza, new mestiza consciousness, new tribalism, nos/otras, and spiritual activism. Each entry includes several sections: carefully selected opening quotations, a (*relatively*) succinct definition, the theory’s story (origins and development), related Anzaldúan theories, questions to explore in future research, and key manuscripts that scholars might find useful when investigating the theory.

From these investigations, we move even more deeply into Anzaldúa’s unpublished materials in part III, “Excavating the Future: The Archives and Beyond.” As the title to this section might suggest, I invite you to approach Anzaldúa’s archives in the tradition of Sankofa (the Akan word and principle reminding us that when we go backward, to retrieve the wisdom of the past, we can move forward more effectively, creating better

anchored, more brilliant futures). The final chapters look back, to explore Anzaldúa's archives; they offer insights about this archival material that can assist us in creating the future of Anzaldúan studies—a future firmly rooted in Anzaldúa's own work. (*Here, too, we follow Anzaldúa's serpentine pattern and process.*)

As if she knew that she'd become a well-known author, Anzaldúa began saving her papers and manuscript drafts in the 1970s and carefully (*some might say obsessively*) preserved material related to her creative process throughout the remainder of her life. And, because she devoted her life to her writing and was a perfectionist with her craft, she produced many drafts of each published piece and left an enormous amount of unpublished material that includes both partial and completed projects. Her archive, the Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers, located at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas, Austin, is enormous: It consists of hundreds of boxes which if stacked in a line would take up more than 125 feet; the boxes are packed with documents spanning Anzaldúa's life—from birth certificates to obituaries, and beyond. Anzaldúa saved a startlingly wide array of materials: fiction, poetry, and essay manuscripts; an entire play in poetic verse; multiple versions of her pre-*Borderlands* autobiography; early drafts of *Borderlands* with unexpected, highly significant authorial and editorial revisions; thousands of pages of writing/research notes; letters, emails, and other correspondence; candle affirmations; Tarot, I Ching, channeled, and astrology readings; favorite books filled with marginalia; drawings, glifos, and doodles; audio and video recordings of writing workshops, meditations, and speaking gigs; and much more. In short, the archive is an enormous, untapped resource filled with secrets and potential insights.

However, at least in part because of Anzaldúa's recursive, complex creative process, it's incredibly challenging to make our way through the material. Even the finding aid (*over one hundred pages in length!*) can seem daunting. Anzaldúa's archives defy linear, chronological organization; they overwhelm us, causing us to overlook hidden treasures. In part III, I offer information, tools, and guidance that make these materials more accessible for readers. I also share fascinating insights to deepen our appreciation for Anzaldúa's contributions while expanding our understanding of her work. Chapter 5 focuses on the archive and chapter 6 on the material within the archive.

Drawing on my experiences as part of the team assembling Anzaldúa's materials after her death, as well as my experiences as her "writing comadre" and editor, chapter 5, "The Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers: Creation Story, Treasure Map, and More," serves as an origin story. In it, I retell the archives' biography, from emergence to current status. Chapter 6, "Anzaldúa's Archival Manuscripts: Overview, Insights, Annotations," offers brief annotations of Anzaldúa's prose manuscripts. Perhaps only the most avid scholars and biggest fans will read this chapter from start to finish (*but what stories it can tell, if you take the time to do so!*). I envision this chapter more as a tool (*or perhaps an entire toolbox*) for scholars and other Anzaldúa readers who'd like to get a more solid sense of Anzaldúa's range (*the incredibly diverse variety of topics she explored*), depth (*for instance, the many manuscripts on a single topic*), and influences (*naguala, poststructuralism, graduate school, and so on*). I have aspired to offer a chapter that can streamline your research (*and maximize your time at the archive*) while also increasing your appreciation for Anzaldúa and her work.

And, finally, the book concludes with a brief postscript in which I offer some suggestions for how to work with Anzaldúa and her theories.

As this brief summary of the book's contents suggests, while in some ways *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook* functions more like a conventional monograph than a handbook, in other ways it does not. (*Just look at chapter 6! Or the very long chapter 4! Or all these italicized statements!*). But how could a monograph on Anzaldúan theories be conventional, given the unconventionality of the theories themselves—made even more unconventional by Anzaldúa's radical faith in her readers' creative inner wisdom?