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Religion and Latina Literature: An Excerpt from Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative

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Editor's Note: Dr. Theresa Delgadillo provided a talk at DePaul University in February 2013, based on the publication of her study, which has garnered considerable attention at conferences. She made some connections to the present theme, therefore we asked her for a short narrative on those aspects. Delgadillo was raised in Wisconsin, and is currently conducting research in, and on, the Midwest, but she also has considerable research and post-doctoral experience in Arizona and California.

In Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative (2011), I do two things: explore what I call Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of spiritual renewal—"spiritual mestizaje" and its relation to Chicana literature and film about religious change; and interpret Chicana fiction and documentary film by Denise Chávez, Demetria Martínez, Norma Cantú, Lourdes Portillo, Judith Gleason and the Feminist Collective of Xalapa, and Kathleen Alcalá to illuminate the ways that these fictional and documentary texts employ testimonio—engage the visual and confront history to tell stories about individuals, collectives, and societies undergoing spiritual transformations. Anzaldúa disrupts the binary between the sacred and profane by recalling her family's popular religious practices, remembering Indigenous worldviews, and centering the body in elaborating a theory of how spiritual renewal both happens and can happen. In analyzing the work of Chicana authors and filmmakers about religion, I am very interested in how the fictional and documentary perspectives they develop also reveal a deep commitment to disrupting that binary in the interests of gender equality and social justice. In this brief excerpt from Chapter One of the book, I discuss the meaning of "spiritual mestizaje" in Anzaldúa's work, differentiating it from other kinds of mestizaje and analyzing how it speaks to a conscious and intentional effort to rethink the paradigms by which we live:

"Anzaldúa does not employ the unique term spiritual mestizaje to designate a particular practice or belief, but instead names and theorizes a critical mobility through which one might gain a new mestiza consciousness … Indeed, the term that Anzaldúa employs to designate the critical and conscious process of transformation in all aspects of being—spiritual mestizaje—requires us to further differentiate among types of mestizaje. In Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987), spiritual mestizaje exists in contrast to racial mestizaje, or interracial mixing; material mestizaje, or the syncretic fusion of varied cultural elements; and historical mestizaje, or the events, movements, and conditions in the Americas through which diverse peoples and cultures were forged, frequently forcefully, into new nationalities and subjectivities. The new mestiza consciousness does not designate the subject “naturally” produced by racial, material, or historical mestizajes, but instead by the framework capable of transforming the conditions of mestiza and borderlands existence. Accordingly, Borderlands reserves the term spiritual mestizaje to designate the critical mobility that can create new mestiza consciousness. Anzaldúa’s use of the term is distinctive in that, for her, it designates a process rather than a product, one that corresponds to the shifting that her autohisteoría recounts.26

In the paragraph leading up to the assertion of spiritual mestizaje, Anzaldúa defines herself as a mestiza, reasserting the pejorative, derogatory meaning of mestizo/a as a marginal, half-breed, uncultured body over the celebratory enshrinement of mestizo/a identity in a move that cracks the sexist, nationalist, and racist encodings of the term. She then declares her willingness to create a new culture. Borderlands thereby distances itself from both Chicano and Mexican nationalist projects that police sexuality and gender as Anzaldúa reopens the terms mestizo/a and mestizaje for interrogation based on their historical meanings. Since the mestizo/a subject has historically been the disenfranchised, marginal, and impure, Anzaldúa claims that space outside of the center and asserts it as the space from which new cultures and identities emerge, a process to which she emphatically subscribes, although in the contemporary situation with a different set of cultures:
“So, don’t give me your tenets and your laws. Don’t give me your luke-warm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.27

The work of that creation, the work of transformation initiated by the recognition of herself, of oneself, as a reclaimed mestiza subject is the ongoing work of spiritual mestizaje, and it involves the critical reexamination of received religious instruction, the recognition of the multiple spiritual traditions that inform life on the borderlands, and the ability to imagine new ways of both apprehending and honoring the spirit in daily life. It is also a call for religious pluralism that recognizes this as an aspect of the historical and material reality of the borderlands. Anzaldúa’s hope for an “evolutionary step forward” may appear to signal a system of stages or a teleological conception, but I read this instead within her emphasis on movement rather than hierarchy as an ongoing or cyclical vigilance in which the religious pluralism of the borderlands, the imposition of orthodoxies, the genocidal elimination of indigenous spiritualities, and historical erasure all figure.”

N.B. Excerpt, and corresponding endnotes, have been reprinted with permission from the publisher, Duke University Press, www.dukeupress.edu.

ENDNOTES
25 Saldívar terms this the “materially hybrid.” See Border Matters.
26 Luis Dávila observes, “Anzaldúa insists that this borderland is in a constant state of transition, dynamic and vibrant,” and rather than suggest a new fixed identity or consciousness, Anzaldúa “tells us that the people of the Borderlands are free to engage in an authentic course of spiritual or even surrealist action with no guarantee of being culturally right, but rather must heroically try to change that world without losing their sense of creative doubt, loving ambivalence and democratic hope.” Dávila, “Gloria Anzaldúa and Octavio Paz,” 53-54.
27 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 22.