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Laboring Histories: The "Reconciliation" of Maternity in the Poetry of Laurie Ann Guerrero

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A host of pains are associated with maternity: aching backs, swollen limbs, headaches, pinched nerves, tender pelvises. Significant weight gain is also an encumbering experience, making walking even for short distances exhaustive. Thus, it might be hard for some to accept that the maternal body is actually highly mobile, and that, despite or because of those heavy, leaky, messy bodies, mothers are actually able to cognitively access different worlds and even reshape them. A reading of maternal facultad in poet Laurie Ann Guerrero’s poems, “Babies Under the Skin” and “Reconciliation” (see poem at end of this article), reveals how such mobility and cognition is ignited through the mother-speakers’ bodies, as their maternal-bodies-in-process move them between and within discursive worlds, thus implicating the mothers in multiple histories and violences of colonization and the medical/birthing industry. This study argues for the need for mothers to continue writing their bodies—to speak the “mess” of the body and of mother-work—creating an epistemically fertile site of knowledge production.

In previous work, I merge philosophies and concepts from feminist epistemology, Chicana theories of the flesh, disability studies and transgender studies to theoretically develop the concept of maternal facultad. I draw from Gloria Anzaldúa’s definition of facultad, an instant “sensing” that is felt on and in the body and alerts the consciousness to physical or psychological threats (60). She explains further: “This sensing is arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is behind which feelings reside/hide” (60). Drawing from Anzaldúa’s foundational work, I define maternal facultad as a form of consciousness honed through the bodily and social experiences of mestiza maternity; this consciousness emerges from the transformation of body and mind as the body’s changing shape implicates the mother in multiple processes of resignification as she travels between and within discursive worlds.

Maternal facultad enables Chicana mothers to be aware not only of their vulnerability as mothers, but of their subjectivities as brown women who visibly bear the marks of la chingada, an interpretation born of the Spanish conquest and a brown woman who carries the child of the conqueror, and thus regarded as a more social burden than social asset. Thus, brown women are both visible and invisible, and, as Anzaldúa would say, both blind with their beak nose (or belly) and are their blind spot. The socially and corporeally “messy” experiences of mestizaje and maternity enable mestiza mothers to generate knowledge about power and ideology from the specificities of their lived and bodily experiences.

In her work on brown body epistemology, Cindy Cruz claims that narratives of brown bodies are “messy” and disruptive to theoretical and literary canons. Identifying the bodies of Chicana mothers and grandmothers as sites from which knowledge production begins, she explains that just as the languages of these mothers are delegitimized, “so is the embodiment of that discourse” (658). Maternal facultad underscores the role of the body...
in the formation of consciousness; further, it reveals how the mestiza maternal embodiment of history, consciousness/knowledge and transformation demands that Chicana theorists of the flesh articulate their own philosophies that reflect the particularities of their lived experiences. In her work on phenomenology and experience, philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff advocates for a more comprehensive understanding of how bodily experience and knowledge are related, stating, “feminist philosophy, if it is to aid in the empowerment of women, must develop a better account of the relationship between reason, theory, and bodily, subjective experience” (Phenomenology, “Poststructuralism,” 42).

Chicana feminist scholarship is driven by a commitment to experience that recognizes the epistemic implications of the ways in which bodies live and feel. By legitimizing the body, we can legitimize its place in revolutionary movements. Emphasizing the importance of speaking specifically about experience and the body, Anzaldúa argues that awareness of the body is integral to social action. Anzaldúa states in Making Face, Making Soul:

I do not believe that “distance” and “objectivity” alone help us come to terms with our issues. The intellect needs the guts and adrenaline that horrific suffering and anger, evoked by some of the pieces, catapult us into. Only when all the charged feelings are unearthed can we get down to “the work,” la tarea, nuestro trabajo—changing culture and all its oppressive interlocking machinations. (xviii)

Anzaldúa’s reference to the viscera, the “guts and adrenaline” of the body, as the substance and catalyst of the intellect calls her readers to draw from their own embodied emotions, such as suffering and anger, to come into consciousness and impel them to action. 

La facultad, Anzaldúa informs, can jolt us into the Coatlicue state, named for the indigenous maternal goddess of duality, a state of ambivalence and contradiction, where old knowledges struggle to resist the emergent new knowledges. Though this is a state of psychic struggle, it is also a site of transformation, a “prelude to crossing,” that propels us to create as a means of making sense of the struggle and healing (Borderlands, 70). In her work on the Coatlicue state, Anzaldúa writes, “‘Knowing’ is painful because after ‘it’ happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before” (70). The pain experienced in the Coatlicue state signals the crossing over from old to new forms of knowledge. We must also consider how individual pain can function metonymically for a collective and historical wound; doing so allows us to create strategies for forging political alliances through common wounds that can lead to physical and spiritual healing.

Pain, healing and transformation are important themes in mestiza narratives in which mestiza subjects negotiate identities in order to work within and between various power structures and positionalities. In Methodology of the Oppressed, Chela Sandoval refers to this movement as a “differential movement,” a function of “differential consciousness,” one of Sandoval’s five forms of opposition. According to Sandoval, differential movement is an “activity of consciousness […] insofar as it enables movement ‘between and among’ ideological positionings” (58, 8). The “cartographic proficiency” of the U.S. third-world subject facilitates this mobility that is characterized by “weaving ‘between and among’ oppositional ideologies […] in order to disclose the distinctions among them” (57, 8). She explains that such weaving can “ignit[e] whole new collective ideals, styles, knowledges, politics and being” (33). Guerrero’s poem, “Reconciliation,” particularly illustrates the “ignition” of “new knowledges” and “being,” as the mother-speaker’s painfully transforming body and subjectivity, from non-mother to mother, locate her within multiple and layered histories.

Guerrero’s poetry is characterized by visceral imagery of the maternal body. Her work enfleshes powerful metaphors of the body and maternity through which her readers are confronted with the “struggles of the flesh” enacted upon the mestiza maternal body. The poems in Guerrero’s book, A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying, are animated through vivid metaphorical and literal imagery that touch on many themes including, but not limited to: history, sexuality, colonialism, Tejana identity, language, regional and cultural folklore, disease and maternity. The striking sensory and body descriptors in her opening piece, “Preparing the Tongue”—“I choke down the heated moo/make carnage of my own mouth” (lines 13-14)—exemplify Guerrero’s method of employing powerful images of corporeality to put matter back on her metaphors. In her poetry, Guerrero writes to confront the
“mess” of the human body, textualize it, and re-enflesh it—perhaps in ways that re-inflict pain and violence on the body, yet perhaps in ways that save it. In an interview, Guerrero states:

I try to create the kind of poems that—first—help me break down the truths in my home, my community, my nation, my history, and hopefully, when the poems are sent out into the world, affect others in a way that allows us to move a little easier as one. I try to take into my body this world, break down the truths associated with things like poverty, hate crimes, privilege, and then with the use of my own cultural experience (as a woman from southside San Antonio) form poems that combine the sing-songy voice of my grandparents and the insistent manner of my generation. (Ortiz, “Patty Interviews Laurie Ann Guerrero”)

Guerrero thus imagines her body as an incubator of worlds, of narratives, of social, historical and cultural truths. In her poetry, she renders into language these “truths” as they are processed through and manifest from her body. The insistence is evident in her direct language that speaks of bodies, pain and pleasure without wincing. In this analysis, I focus on two poems, “Babies Under the Skin,” and “Reconciliation.” I briefly introduce “Babies” first to examine the beginnings of Guerrero’s sense of maternal embodiment. I then build upon this maternal embodiment in my reading of “Reconciliation,” where I reveal evidence of maternal facultad.

“Babies” opens with: “You do not burst metaphoric,” (line 4) and immediately the narrator insists on the corporeality of her babies’ conceptions and of her motherhood. Directly addressing her children as “you,” the narrator writes of them as permeating her body, first “com[ing] shy and unsure” (lines 7-8) before “the flood of [them] into [her] brain and cells” (6-7). The speaker’s body is presented as both “flood[ed]” and “a city”—a space that is overrun and a space that is inhabited—and suggests (at least) two simultaneously embodied experiences of pregnancy.

The children are born, their “births celebrated in the water and wind” (8-9). The narrator emphasizes their infant-state, their “little fish-mouts/ rooting, swallowing mouthfuls of air/ Lipskin still paper” (9-11). As they “[yeart] for mother muscle,” the narrator’s breasts lets down “at the thought” of her children. As Miller-McLemore writes about her experience breastfeeding her child,

To a great degree, however untrustworthy or dangerous, at least in the Western history of sexuality, I must rely on a bodily passion, a knowing driven by a welcomed lust or need that seeks satisfaction. In this state of awareness, I have actually left a train car in which a child cried because of the stir it created in me; in general, just the sight of a baby can evoke a milk let-down response in lactating mothers. In this state I learn, change, and develop; if I do not, the child will not. Yet most theories see the process toward individuation as only the child’s. (241)

When the narrator ends with her statement, “I stay living/ got to nourish the ones I can touch” (17-18), she exhibits a similar “bodily passion,” one that is driven by the urgency of breastfeeding. The imperative for survival of both mother and child is fulfilled through breastfeeding, through the knowledge that one’s life depends on another: the narrator affirms, “we are strangers but for the needing/ of each other” (5-6). “Babies Under the Skin” illustrates how the processes of conception, birth and breastfeeding, as Miller-McLemore insists, are critical to the narrator’s own process toward individuation. “Reconciliation,” moreover, even more clearly recounts the significance of the birthing process in the shaping of maternal identity.

In “Reconciliation,” the narrator recounts when, at 19 years old, she gave birth to her first child. Opening her poem with the nurse’s insistence that “you shit” (line 2), the speaker engages in a poetics of the body that conveys the objectifying and abjectifying practices of the birthing industry, and its disruption of maternal agency. Read within the larger context of her work, and its themes of colonization, sexuality and bodies, the speaker is situated
within broader histories of the violations of Latinas, such as in the medical industry, and historical patriarchal narratives of maternity and Mexican motherhood. In fact, under the title of the poem, Guerrero indicates that it was composed in San Antonio, Texas, which has one of the highest teenage birth rates in the country\(^6\) and a history of targeting young Latinas for medical trials.

In *Chicanas Speak Out*, Mirta Vidal informs:

Chicanas have been used as guinea pigs for experimentation with contraception. This was done recently in San Antonio by a doctor who wanted to test the reaction of women to birth control pills. Without informing them or asking their opinion, he gave some of the women dummy pills (placebos) that would not prevent conception, and as a result some of the women became pregnant. When questioned about his action, his reply was: “If you think you can explain a placebo test to women like these, you never met Mrs. Gómez from the West Side.” (56)

The history of reproductive violence has been documented by scholars, for example, sociologist Elena Gutiérrez,\(^7\) and reveals systematic attempted genocide of brown people. The violations, thus, are multiple—physical, historical and cultural.

Continuing with the poem, in the writing of her episiotomy, Guerrero’s body becomes a site upon which power is contested. Like Coatlicue, the maternal goddess of duality, the mother is suspended between selves, embodying a painful state of becoming the Coatlicue state. Recounting, “I begged a man whose eyes were all I saw: Cut me. Cut me, please” (8), the narrator asks for an episiotomy to expedite the birthing process made even more urgent by the fact that her child was “stuck” after seventeen hours of labor. Birth activists usually denounce episiotomy as a forced medical intervention that is not always necessary and that decenters the woman within the birth experience;\(^8\) however, with little control over the physiological process of labor, the narrator’s demand for an episiotomy can be read as a reclamation of agency within an experience of limited autonomy. The demand to be “cut” evokes powerful allusions to Octavio Paz’s narrative on the legendary La Malinche, or, as Paz refers to her in his landmark text, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, “la Chingada”: “What is the Chingada? The Chingada is the Mother forcibly opened, violated or deceived” (79). Paz’s misogynist depiction of the indigenous woman Malintzin/Malinche as violated and deceived for having birthed children fathered by Spanish conquistador, Hernan Cortés, however, is not so easily overlaid onto the speaking subject, whose demand to be “cut” does not result in a forced violation, but a new maternal subjectivity.

In *Chicanas Speak Out*, Mirta Vidal informs:

In Western culture, it is customary that mothers hold their babies immediately after birth, beginning the physical and psychological process of bonding and infant survival. In the poem, however, the mother’s episiotomy—the procedure that facilitates her delivery—becomes the obstacle to her identity as a mother. Referring to her desire to hold her son, the speaker states, “I could not. I was stitched like a rag doll, too swollen for one knee/ to touch the other” (13-14). She immediately questions, “And hadn’t I just had two hearts/ inside my body, and hadn’t I lost enough of myself that day?” (14-15). The speaker’s self-reflexive questions exemplify a meta-awareness of her changing identity; having already experienced the physical transformation, she anticipates her transformation into the social role of *mother*. It is at this point in her physical process of transformation when the pain, separation and the loss of blood and self that mark her self-loss ignite her maternal facultad toward a deeper maternal consciousness.

The mother-speaker’s awareness deepens even more as the poem continues. In her work on childbirth and maternal subjectivity in literature, maternal theorist Alice Adams explains: “Women’s poetry and narratives about giving birth offer a very different view
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They suggest that the birth process may be read not as regression but as an evolution, in which a woman's understanding of herself becomes more complex and expansive" (26). This evolution becomes more apparent when the narrator sees the other mother, "the open casket of her body, bloody and incomplete" (20). In the poem, the mother, her six daughters, a man, and the mother's own mother, are crying, and the narrator's questions about the absence of the baby suggest he is dead. The scene becomes more horrific when the nurse enters the room:

She eyed me through the mesh, did not find perversion in a boy on the breast. But the nurses came to her, too: asked about her shits, as if no one was in the room, as if the melting hearts of that family, five feet away, did not threaten to drown us all. The woman cursed in a mother's Spanish when the nurse made her hold up her body for an enema … (lines 22-27)

Here, several narratives of violation can be read, including the physical violation of the mother and the violation of both the narrator's and mother's privacy.

The woman's children, having witnessed the violation of their mother and mourning the loss of the baby, leave the room, seemingly victimized themselves:

[…] Her living children soldiered out of the room one by one, by one, crossing at the foot of my bed. Wild baby on my belly, each took her turn cursing my child and me. With their mother's eyes, each one raised me to my feet. (27-30)

In Borderlands, Anzaldúa speaks of the mirror as "an ambivalent symbol," explaining that the act of looking into a mirror entails seeing and being seen:

The eye pins down the object of its gaze, scrutinizes it, judges it. But in a glance also lies awareness, knowledge. These seemingly contradictory aspects—the act of being seen, held immobilized by a glance, and "seeing through" an experience—are symbolized by the underground aspects of … the Coatlicue State. (64)

In the poem, the narrator not only "sees" the mother, but is seen by her family, who stare at her as they walk out of the room. As they stare, the positions are switched and the speaker is not only the immobilized object of the gaze, but is able to "see through" the experience and enters the Coatlicue state. Anzaldúa explains, "Those activities or Coatlicue states which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life are exactly what propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself. Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we make meanings out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are" (68). The narrator does not divulge to her readers what that meaning may be, but through the act of witnessing the objectification—the forced violation—of another mother, she is "raised to her feet," emboldened in her new consciousness through her newly formed maternal facultad.

Through the reflective writing of this poem, Guerrero appoints herself the speaking subject, refusing to remain "violated" through silence, and situates herself within the same trajectory of Chicana feminist revisions of La Malinche, who is transformed from one who is violated to an agent of change, the origins of a new race. This moment can be identified as, what Emma Pérez calls, the "rupturing space … where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated" (6). Here, in the face of multiple narratives of motherhood, bodies, empowerment and disempowerment, Guerrero negotiates the "dilemmas" of her present state and the states of others; as she is "raised to her feet" through her emerging maternal consciousness, Guerrero reclaims the agency to determine her future maternal self. She has, as her title conveys, "reconciled" the clashing discourses and narratives that are embodied by her mestiza maternity. The maternal facultad that develops through the experience of birth and new motherhood, as well as through the act of witnessing and being witnessed, signals the narrator's transformation into a subject of empowered maternal agency at the end of the poem.

It is imperative that mothers continue to write their bodies—to speak to the "mess" of the body, of birth and of mother-work—in order to insist on their bodies
as knowing and theorizable entities. Chicana feminist scholars must continue to “matter” mothers; that is, to re-enflesh them with desire, sexuality and pain, and enable them to speak from the bodies which, historically and culturally, have not always fully been theirs. Just as importantly, Chicana feminists must continue to articulate liberatory concepts, such as maternal facultad, that legitimize brown bodies as sites of knowledge production.

In Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, Adrienne Rich lays out the imperative for women to “think through the body, to connect what has been so cruelly disorganized—our great mental capacities, hardly used; our highly-developed tactile sense; our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain-enduring, multi-pleasured physicality” (284). Anzaldúa, however, imagines the body as more than something that can be thought through; she imagines it as a place of transformation: “For silence to transform into speech, sounds and words, it must first traverse through our female bodies. For the body to give birth to utterance, the human entity must recognize itself as carnal [...] When she transforms silence into language, a woman transgresses” (Making Face, 242). Guerrero’s poetry is the poetry of transgression.

Bodies that feel and know must be recognized as sites of truth and knowledge; this is especially critical in a time when the bodies of brown mothers continue to be policed. From the birth control experiments on West Side Mexican women in the 1950s, recounted by Mirta Vidal, to current anti-immigration state laws that legalize racial profiling, and to the recent inclusion of the term “anchor baby” in the American Heritage Dictionary, the brown maternal body continues to represent a symbolic threat to national identity and state sovereignty. Guerrero’s poetry not only exposes this historical and Western disavowal of these brown women’s bodies, but insists on the presence and right to personhood of the disavowed. Through “messy” narratives and concepts of mestizaje, maternity, and facultad—by putting matter back on the mestiza mother—Guerrero’s poetry insists on the mestiza mother’s right to self-define and to exist.

ENDNOTES
1 *Facultad* is Spanish for “faculty” or “ability.” The concept of *facultad* is found in traditional Mexican lore as that keen supersensory awareness that allows people to negotiate the world; for Gloria Anzaldúa, it is the “capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities to see the deep structure below the surface” (Borderlands, 60).
2 The theoretical discussion of maternal *facultad* appears most prominently in my dissertation. See Mercado-López’s entry on the reference page for bibliographic information.
3 *Mestizaje* is Spanish for “mixture” and in Anzaldúa’s work refers specifically to the mixed identities of those of indigenous and Spanish descent.
4 “Babies Under the Skin” was published in Guerrero’s first chapbook of the same name, which was the 2008 winner of the Panhandler Publishing Chapbook Award, as well as in the scholarly journal, *Feminist Studies*.
5 Though “Reconciliation” was written at the same time as the poems in A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying, it is not part of the collection, and remains unpublished.
7 Gutierrez’s *Fertile Matters: The Politics of Mexican-Origin Women’s Reproduction* is one of the richest accounts of forced sterilization of Mexican women in California.
8 Suzanne Arms describes the episiotomy as a practice of forced medical intervention in *Immaculate Deception II: Myth, Magic & Birth*.
9 For more works on Chicana feminist readings of La Malinche, refer to Cordelia Candelaria’s “La Malinche, Feminist Prototype” in Chicana Leadership: The Frontiers Reader, edited by Yolanda Flores Niemann; Norma Alarcón’s “Chicana’s Feminist Literature: A Re-vision Through Malintzin/ or Malintzin Putting Flesh Back on the Object” in This Bridge Called My Back, edited by Cherrie L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa; and Adelaida del Castillo’s “Malintzin Tenepal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective” in Essays on La Mujer, edited by Rosaura Sánchez and Rosa Maria Cruz.

WORKS CITED
Reconciliation
San Antonio, TX

After the baby is born, before the nurses release you to tend in the mad world
a pruney and purpled animal writhing at the tit, they insist you shit.

I was nineteen, knew not the ink of earth, how it would write
my new son’s life, or mine, and a woman in pink & blue scrubs
came every two hours to ask: have you left me anything?
I could not. I had been—seventeen hours after

I first felt my womb crunching down on itself, the child was stuck.
I begged a man whose eyes were all I saw: Cut me. Cut me, please.

He took scissors, long and cold, and thin at the moon and snipped
away the muscle that kept my child from his first breath-taking.

I bled each of my mother’s births, my grandmother’s. Before I learned
how to hold my boy: have you left me anything?
I could not. I was stitched like a rag doll, too swollen for one knee
to touch the other. And hadn’t I just had two hearts

inside my body, and hadn’t I lost enough of myself that day?
In recovery, a large woman next to me—six daughters around her bed,

and a man, and her mother—cried in agony. I could see their silhouettes
through a thin veil the color of dusk. Where was her baby?

Why was he gone? They stood around her as if at a viewing:
the open casket of her body, bloody and incomplete.

My own son a bunted and suckling football, real-life baby doll.
She eyed me through the mesh, did not find perversion in a boy

on the breast. But the nurses came to her, too: asked about her shits,
as if no one was in the room, as if the melting hearts of that family,

five feet away, did not threaten to drown us all. The woman cursed
in a mother’s Spanish when the nurse made her hold up her body

for an enema. Her living children soldiered out of the room one by one,
by one, crossing at the foot of my bed. Wild baby on my belly,

each took her turn cursing my child and me.
With their mother’s eyes, each one raised me to my feet.

Permission granted by the poet, Laurie Ann Guerrero, to include her poem here.