

# Gloria Anzaldúa's *El Mundo Zurdo*: Exploring a Relational Feminist Theology of Interconnectedness

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## Abstract

This article critically departs from the second-wave feminism of first-generation Latina feminist and *mujerista* theology by focusing on Chicana queer feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's relational epistemology. I argue that Anzaldúa's work is a new form of feminist theologising that stems from a radical commitment to interconnectedness and relationality. I enter into a conversation with Anzaldúa in order to foreground new, productive, and creative ways to reflect on feminist standpoint epistemology and ontology, which in turn open up interesting avenues through which to think about the material and experiential dimensions of women's theologising. I consider Anzaldúa's *El Mundo Zurdo* (The Left-Handed World)<sup>1</sup> and her fecund notion of spiritual activism in order to illuminate the centrality of relationality and interdependence when conceptualising new forms of women's subjective engagements in the production of theology.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The production of Christian theology from the perspective of women significantly contributes to the transformation of hegemonic, androcentric, and patriarchal theological frameworks (see Ruether 1995; Daly 1993; Jones

2000; Hunt and Neu 2012; Schüssler Fiorenza 1994; Aquino 2002; and Isasi-Díaz 1993). Feminist standpoint epistemology, an identifiable tool in the production of feminist theology, was an important feature of first-generation feminist theologians, in that the situated knowledges of women's realities and oppressed locations came to the fore (see Daly 1993 and Ruether 1995).<sup>3</sup>

Given the central role of feminist standpoint epistemology in the production of feminist theology, I propose to disrupt the feminist claim that all knowledge is situated, by suggesting that knowledge is animated by a relational event that is also organised by the entanglement of bodily materiality. The relational event organised by bodily materiality takes into consideration the assemblages of bodies in relation to other beings and things. I argue that women have a particular material and bodily epistemic standpoint that should be given greater centrality as women come to take hold of positions of religious and spiritual leadership. As I envision it, women's bodily epistemic standpoint is a material reality resulting from the radical interconnectedness to all things that exists on the continuum of becoming.

Prioritising a bodily epistemic standpoint holds a potential for reimagining feminist standpoint epistemology and feminist theology as new contours of epistemology, or ways of knowing. New ontologies, or new forms of being and becoming, are further produced in a dialectic of relationality. This dialectic of relationality is set in motion when one turns inward to the self and also outward toward others. The turn inward to the self affirms the materiality of the body as an epistemic site for the production of material knowledge and is a critical and creative opening for the material production of theology — allowing for embodied and experiential ways of knowing, or a relational epistemology.<sup>4</sup> Turning inward initiates new ways of producing theology, which are potentially enacted as women turn outward toward the world and other material subjects. Through the prioritisation of a bodily epistemic standpoint, relationships of self and other might become transformed into new forms of radical interconnectedness, creating moments of connection across differences. Differences may thereby be envisioned as bridges of alliances.

Anzaldúa theorised about the creation of relationships as “bridges”, and about ways that bridges build alliances (Anzaldúa 1990: 216-231). The bridge functions both as a relational feature and as a reality that comes into being as one walks across it and relates with oneself. The bridge that is built in relation with another is not a stable site of critical reflection, but rather an oscillating feature of an epistemic relationality. The turn toward another while one is standing on the relational bridge initiates new forms of relationality that are supported by the material knowledge cultivated and motivated by the turn

inward. The bridge makes the material body central to relating, generating a new form of being and becoming in the world that deeply connects material bodies to one another through their standpoint on the bridge.

The relational bridge also invokes new forms of feminist theologising, in that the bridge initiates an incarnation of a new relationality that is not mediated by external standards of religion, especially for those seeking new contours of feminist theology. The bodily epistemic standpoint reimagines traditional, patriarchal spiritualities, in that what is achieved when turning inward is a new staple of material knowledge that informs a spirit-inflected connectedness originating from the material body. Relationships may transform when this spirit-inflected connectedness meets another material body that is attuned to its own bodily epistemic standpoint. Gloria Anzaldúa's *El Mundo Zurdo* is the paradigm used for theorising this radical interconnectivity to all persons and things.<sup>5</sup>

Paying particular attention to in(ter)ventions of women's epistemologies and ontologies, Latina feminist theologians María Pilar Aquino and Ada María Isasi-Díaz have created methods of theologising that place women's bodies as a central socio-analytic locus (Aquino, 2002; Isasi-Díaz, 1993, 2004). Their works on theologies of interculturality and *mestizaje* (mixed races) as difference and ontology are important and significant contributions to the field of feminist theologies, especially theologies of colour. However, Aquino and Isasi-Díaz primarily rely on second-wave feminism in their approach. Contrastingly, Chicana queer feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, reflecting on questions of relating across differences, pries open new, "enfleshed" epistemologies and ontologies that engender critical openings through which traditional feminist standpoint epistemology can be taken to a new ontological level — where ethics, epistemology, and ontology intersect and thoroughly interweave with one another, creating a new assemblage of relational differences in action.

*El Mundo Zurdo* introduces a new theoretical framework that braids together ethics, epistemology, and ontology. I call it an *ethico-onto-epistemology* that privileges bodily forms in ways of knowing and being.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I suggest that the work of Gloria Anzaldúa might create a critical opening for highlighting the materiality of bodies, relationality, and interconnectedness in ways that help mediate a relational feminist theology and thus, new forms of feminist theologising. I do not begin with an essentialised standpoint of women's bodies or suggest that all knowledge is situated; rather, I expand upon the differences of women across diverse spectrums and invite women of all types to enter into *El Mundo Zurdo* to en flesh a relational orientation of feminist theology as a particularised and critical entry point and bodily epistemic standpoint.

## Gloria Anzaldúa's Relational Feminist Theology of Interconnectedness

Feminist theology has taken the category of women's experience as the central feature in the production of theology in order to depart from androcentric theology and patriarchal hermeneutics (see Aquino 2002; Johnson 2002; and Ruether 1993). In many ways, what this branch of theology has done is to highlight the experiences of women as marginalised in and by dominant and normative strands of theology. What is eclipsed in this feminist theological approach is the bridging together of women's experience with the real materiality of the body — a critical nexus emphasised in the work of Anzaldúa.

Gloria Anzaldúa, a self-identified Tejana *patlache* (queer), foregrounds theories concerning the self, body, and relationality. Anzaldúa's work takes seriously indigenous religions and spiritualities, along with the indigenous roots of androcentric and conventional religions (see Anzaldúa 1987 and 1990). Her engagement with religion and spirituality does not rely on external standards and authorities. Rather Anzaldúa's interest in the orishas and other spirits and indeterminate beings, for example, becomes a great source for considering new ways of accessing the Spirit and/or the Divine.

In her groundbreaking book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Anzaldúa talks about the realness of spirit. In her view, there is something more than human and animal beings in this world; and in fact, we humans are radically connected to all things and imbued with vibrational energies or spirit (see also Keating 2000 and 2012). While her perspectives might seem to some to resemble New Age views, Anzaldúa relies on indigenous religions and rituals in order to explore productive notions of being and becoming and theorises a spirit-inflected relational animist theology.<sup>7</sup> This is a radical turn away from the patriarchal and androcentric religions that inform both our politics in today's world and the normative strands of feminist theology. Additionally, as mentioned above, I suggest that Anzaldúa's work departs from traditional sources of feminist theology by turning to relationality and the material body in order to carve out new contours of a feminist theology that can accommodate all.

A relational feminist theology is a holistic spirituality whose starting point is the self, and that includes the active and ongoing recognition that we are all radically interconnected with all persons and things. Anzaldúa illustrates this relationality in one of her last published essays before her death, where she urges, "now let us shift ... the path of *conocimiento* ... inner work, public acts" (2002):

With awe and wonder you look around, recognizing the preciousness of the earth, the sanctity of every human being

on the planet, the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings — *somos todos un país* [we are all a country/land]. Love swells in your chest and shoots out of your heart chakra, linking you to everyone/everything ... You share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label. This *conocimiento* [knowledge] motivates you to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean — to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing. (2002: 558)

Anzaldúa's poignant reflection on being-in-the-world ignites a new form of epistemology and produces new forms of accessing knowledge. She begins with the recognition that the self in relation with others creates a new form of being in the world — animated by a radical sense of becoming and bridging across differences. This act of bridging creates new forms of alliances with others, particularly with other women, who turn inward, toward the self. This turn inward toward the self as a potential relational spirituality is also a new and different epistemic feature that contrasts with the reliance of traditional god-worship and conventional religion on an external myth of God. It is from this bodily epistemic standpoint that we can begin to rethink relationality and re-imagine ourselves enfleshing a *spirituality-in-acción* (spirituality in action).<sup>8</sup>

Anzaldúa fashioned a sense of being in the world that is tightly connected to a notion of personal and collective activism. She called this *spiritual activism* (in Keating 2000: 8). AnaLouise Keating, a long-time writing *comadre* of Anzaldúa and world-renowned Anzaldúan scholar, defines spiritual activism in the following ways:

Spiritual activism is 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)

I suggest that spiritual activism can become the way in which we rethink traditional forms of feminist theology and move toward a theology rooted

in both relationality and interconnectedness; and that doing so helps enact the reality and vision of *El Mundo Zurdo*. Spiritual activism is also a call for us to recognise the radical interconnectedness of all living things: persons, animals, inanimate objects, even microscopic organisms. The move toward a relational feminist theology of interconnectedness is thus a call to move beyond oppositional politics that are often central to traditional (and feminist) theologies.<sup>9</sup> Anzaldúa's work helps frame this possibility. Destabilising dualistic and hierarchical thinking, Anzaldúa introduces what she calls "connectionist thinking". She explains:

When perpetual conflict erodes a sense of connectedness and wholeness *la nepantlera* [an in/between and threshold being who engages in multiple worlds simultaneously] calls on the "connectionist" faculty to show the deep common ground and interwoven kinship among all things and people. This faculty, one of less-structured thoughts, less-rigid categorizations, and thinner boundaries, allows us to picture — via reverie, dreaming, and artistic creativity — similarities instead of solid divisions. (2002: 568)

Connectionist thinking offers feminist theology the element of relationality and collectiveness — a type of togetherness that is animated by holistic spirituality. The impulse to build systems of connection within communities helps "enflesh" the already existing reality of interconnectedness to all persons and things. A sense of connection creates a new way of making sense of feminist theology, in that theology is less about traditional "god-talk" and more about connecting across differences and building bridges of alliances. Anzaldúa narrates:

We the women here, take a trip back into the self, travel to the deep core of our roots to discover and reclaim our colored souls, our rituals, our religion. We reach a spirituality that has been hidden in the hearts of oppressed people under layers of centuries of traditional god-worship. (1981a: 195)

According to Anzaldúa, looking back into the self is one step in enfleshing a *spirituality-in-acción* and acknowledging the bodily epistemic standpoint from which a *spirituality-in-acción* stems. This "trip" into the self also recognises the complex interrelatedness of the self with the material world and its entanglements, which give shape and form to new forms of knowledge. In

many respects, the material body comes into being differently when the self is engaged. It is a synthesis of spirit and matter, entanglements of knowledge and knowing practices that stem from bodily materiality. It is important to point out that the recognition of spirit and matter mingling (interconnective realities) distinguishes a *spirituality-in-acción* (or spiritual activism) from mainstream New Age movements, conventional and organised religions, and traditional forms of feminist theologising (Keating 2008: 57-58). It is also important to note that both New Age movements and conventional/organised religions focus, almost entirely, on beliefs that are to change the person, leaving social structures and institutions intact.

A *spirituality-in-acción* begins with the individual, the self, and connects with what is outside the material self, seeking to both challenge and transform existing structures and institutions for radical social change; it is, as Keating argues, a post-oppositional politics of social change, and an awareness that critical social theory can embody the framework of *El Mundo Zurdo* (2008: 53-69). It is an attempt to use the *self-in-acción* as the means by which social transformation happens: a materially enfolded social theory that begins with the dialectic of relationality, and moves internally and then outwardly, enacting from one's bodily epistemic standpoint. The individual – the self – becomes the authority, and does not rely on external standards, doctrines, or creeds for guidance in achieving social transformation. This is how a *spirituality-in-acción* differs from traditional, first-generation feminist theology. In fact, the relationality that connects this holistic spirituality is what helps animate a new relational feminist theology that may inspire social change. As Anzaldúa says, "Our spirituality does not come from outside ourselves. It emerges when we listen to the 'small still voice' [...] within us which can empower us to create actual change in the world" (1981a: 195).

I suggest that a relational feminist theology of interconnectedness should begin with the material self. This material self is always in relation with the materiality that animates this world, a particular spiritual entanglement that ushers in new forms of connecting with all things. While a *spirituality-in-acción* begins with the material self, it is not an indication that the individual is isolated in her own thoughts and beliefs. The *self-in-acción* is an ongoing process of self-reflection and self-growth, a cycle of learning and purging and connecting beyond oneself. Anzaldúa affirms self-exploration and social transformation as a reciprocal process. The journey inward to the self is never only a focus on one's feelings or thoughts. It is always in an intimate intersection with social change and connection with all that exists. The journey to the self in relationship with social change results in self-change and social transformation. Anzaldúa articulates it in this way:

I believe that by changing ourselves we change the world, that traveling the El Mundo Zurdo path is the path of a two-way movement — a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society. And yet, I am confused as to how to accomplish this. (1981b: 208)

This honest statement unmasks the difficulty that a commitment to social change presents to us, and the reality that when we make a commitment to step into our ourselves we activate change on multiple levels. Yet, this statement also reveals the unmistakable engagement of the self-in-relation with multiple communities and the awareness that this process is both confusing and difficult. What Anzaldúa's statement also reveals is the real humanity of uncertainty. Anzaldúa is not sure how to accomplish social change, but believes that a *spirituality-in-acción* initiates a new *self-in-acción* that might offer possibilities for the reconstruction of society—the building of radically inclusive and radically hospitable communities.

Despite her uncertainty, Anzaldúa maintains a commitment to the reality that life is a relational event, and that all that exists is interconnected with oneself (see Keating 2008: 60). The recognition of ourselves-in-relation unmasks a larger picture; we are part of a whole, or we are the sum of many parts. Materiality taken in this respect mobilises our thinking about the multiple shared relationships that we en flesh, and that contribute to our being and becoming, our knowing practices, and our acting in the world. This recognition of our connection to many beings and things represents knowledge and knowing practices emerging from the materiality of the body as a result of enfleshing a *self-in-acción* — igniting a new sense of self, agency, mattering, and meaning regarding our bodies as they exist in this world. This *self-in-acción* or self-in-relation standpoint creates a greater epistemic privilege for those enfleshing an interconnected way of being and becoming in the world.

### **The Reality of *El Mundo Zurdo*: Interconnectedness as Greater Epistemic Privilege**

Feminist theology developed by first-generation Latina feminist liberation theologians, in particular María Pilar Aquino (2002) and Ada María Isasi-Díaz (1993, 2004), produces new epistemological and ontological frameworks that take women's stories and experiences seriously. I am especially inspired by Aquino's work with women to produce new forms of knowing and accessing the Divine — and its outcome, which I call "birthing ecclesial feminism"



(Henderson-Espinoza 2006). What are the boundaries and limitations of such a feminism? Does ecclesial feminism begin to re-imagine new and different forms of being and becoming an ecclesial society? I imagine this society as one that takes the feminist standpoint seriously, and recognises the centrality of women's stories. Yet this framework is produced from a traditional patriarchal ecclesial and theological centre, thereby limiting the ways that women can access these theories.

Likewise, the work on difference in Isasi-Díaz (1993, 2004) points toward elements and features of relating across multiple differences. However, I am unsure if Isasi-Díaz's work features radical relating, as she does not deal with the reality of relationality, though she does engage her relationship with Womanist movements. While compelling in its own right, can her work further offer possibilities for women searching for new modes of being and becoming in the world? Ways that centre on relating across radical differences and maintaining a new and fresh epistemology that calls forth women's ontic realities? I suggest, rather, a turn to the theory and reality of interconnectedness and relationality found in Anzaldúa as the primary means to develop a relational feminist theology that can create critical openings for women to explore new forms of theologising from their own selves and material bodies.

Because material bodies are interconnected with all living and non-living beings, knowledge emerges within the interstices of these connections, and the in-between spaces prove to be a rich place from which knowledge can be produced. Because Anzaldúa's *spirituality-in-acción* privileges connectionist frameworks, it embodies greater epistemic privilege because it takes seriously both self and other (and everything in between)—connecting knowledge with reality and acting. Interconnectedness, while part of the radical inclusionary politics of being and becoming, is an epistemic standpoint that plays an especially important role in a relational feminist theology. Relationality demands an ongoing turn to the self and other in the cycle of becoming, which is rooted in the multiple differences of all persons and things.

## Conclusion

While the first generation of Latina feminist liberation theology creates a rich tapestry that aids in the development of dynamic models for women's theological engagements, what is missed is the relational modality that is central to Anzaldúa's work. The reality of relational intersections, which informs Anzaldúa's *spirituality-in-acción*, invites a more intersectional framework to manifest in actualising new modes of epistemologies and ontologies. An example of this is her theory of *El Mundo Zurdo*: a vision of

radical inclusionary politics that privileges a connectionist or relational epistemology and multiple ways of knowing. These ways of knowing are knowledge practices that participate in a cycle of difference and repetition, a spiral of being and becoming different and multiple in one's own material reality. There are also ontological features to *El Mundo Zurdo*, in that the reality it creates is both a connectionist reality and a relational reality that support a *spirituality-in-acción*.

Anzaldúa's vision of a new connected world initiates a tripartite way of thinking about reality, knowledge, and actions; or ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Feminist theology could benefit from this tripartite way of thinking about concepts, material, and other things. I therefore suggest that women of all colours, as well as men and children, look toward a relational feminist theology of interconnectedness as a way of enacting a new *spirituality-in-acción*. *El Mundo Zurdo* is a world where relationality and connection are both primary, and it is a reality that we can enact together as we build alliances across differences and bridge our realities toward a collectivist end. The vision of *El Mundo Zurdo* calls for a deep commitment to the everydayness of relationality and connection across diverse spectrums of bodies and things. We cannot achieve this reality, or practice a relational feminist theology of interconnectedness, without acknowledging the real impact material reality has on each of us and the ways that our material bodies are always in relationship with other beings and other things.

Spiritual Activism is one such framework, developed by Anzaldúa and elucidated in her theory of *El Mundo Zurdo*. It is a spiritual practice, if you will, of always being attuned to one's own self and other relationships — both human and non-human. Spiritual Activism shares a vital relationship with Anzaldúa's radical inclusionary politics and theory of *El Mundo Zurdo* (among other theories), which seek to destabilise traditional forms of power and dominance. I suggest that attuning ourselves toward a *spirituality-in-acción* shifts us all in the direction of a metaphysics of interconnectedness. With careful attention toward this metaphysics of interconnectedness, we are able to transform traditional (patriarchal) ways of relating to one another into those of a relational form of being and becoming in the world that is different, multiple, and inclusive — braiding together ontology, epistemology, and ethics, and allowing *El Mundo Zurdo* to materialise in the in-between spaces of multiple relationships with ourselves and others.

## Notes

- 1 *El Mundo Zurdo* is an aspect of Anzaldúa's work that initiates a radical vision of a transformative world — a world that is built out of the “left-handedness”, or the difference, that emerges from our varying communities.
- 2 I am grateful to Kelli D. Zaytoun for her invaluable support and ongoing commitment to creative and critical conversations regarding this essay and all things Anzaldúa. Her friendship encourages me to continue on the path of re-imagining new contours of feminist standpoint epistemology and teasing out the radical notions of Anzaldúa's revolutionary relational epistemology. I have written this essay with her in mind.
- 3 Feminist standpoint epistemology suggests three principles: (1) knowledge is socially situated; (2) marginalised groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of their marginality than it is for non-marginalised groups; and (3) research, particularly pertaining to power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalised. See the collection of feminist and womanist writings *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981).
- 4 In this essay I argue for a relational epistemology that stems from material bodies in relation to themselves and others. This work is inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa and my relationships with the Surdist@s, a small collective of Anzaldúan theorists that includes Betsy Dahms, AnaLouise Keating, and Kelli Zaytoun.
- 5 In “El Mundo Zurdo: The Vision” (1981a), Gloria Anzaldúa imagines a new form of relational spirituality that begins from the turn inward. I use this as my critical point of departure, as opposed to beginning with the external myth of God and patriarchal religion.
- 6 In describing being/reality and knowledge production as an entanglement of matter, Karen Barad (2007) employs the term *onto-epistem-ology*. In other words, she ties ontology together with epistemology. I wish to push this further, and suggest the term *ethico-onto-epistem-ology* in order to bring together ethics, ontology, and epistemology — three integral and intersecting domains in the work of Anzaldúa.
- 7 Animism commonly signals a type of ontology or worldview where non-human entities, including animals, plants, and even inanimate objects or phenomena possesses its own, unique spiritual essence.
- 8 This type of holistic spirituality, which is *in-acción*, relies on the ongoing commitment of relationality, and not on the myth of a god or tradition/conventional god-worship.
- 9 While first-generation feminist theologies critiqued androcentrism and patriarchy, they also created a dualist and oppositional framework (“us” against “them” and “self” and “other”) See, for example, Mary Daly (1993).

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