

Gloria Anzaldúa (author), AnaLouise Keating (editor)
Light in the Dark/ Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality
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The publication of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Light in the Dark/ Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* eleven years after her death in 2004 is a highly anticipated--and enormously important--event in feminist scholarship, one that takes both philosophy and activism in new directions. The manuscript expands, deepens, and at times shifts from her earlier work in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, *This Bridge Called My Back*, *This Bridge We Call Home*, and elsewhere, and it makes significant philosophical contributions to feminism, epistemology, aesthetics, ontology, critical philosophy of race, and social and political thought at the same time that it calls into question how we conceive of and organize these areas of study to begin with. Indeed, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro* thematizes the process of thinking, writing, and creating, "question[ing] its own formalizing and ordering attempts, its own strategies, the machinations of thought itself, of theory formulated on an experiential level of discourse" (7). Anzaldúa's excavation of her own writing and thinking practice throughout this text--as well as her unique mode of working between languages and genres--builds on her previous work, but in *Light in the Dark/ Luz en lo oscuro* her creative process is even more richly rendered. The manuscript itself is composed of six chapters and a preface, distinct but interconnected threads that recast and reimagine central philosophical questions surrounding oppression, resistance, identity, knowledge, and experience. Throughout, Anzaldúa thematizes the practice of writing, analysis, and theoretical work, making vivid the process and possibilities of theory and philosophy.

Questions about what it means to think and create have a special depth and urgency in this volume. Anzaldúa's monograph, which she worked on but did not complete during the last decade of her life, is accompanied in this edition by brief appendixes containing alternate openings, unfinished sections, historical notes on the manuscript's development, and Anzaldúa's own correspondence about her creative process and health while working on this project. Taken together, these elements--carefully edited and framed in this volume by AnaLouise Keating--"rewrit[e] narratives of identity, nationalism, ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality, and aesthetics" by "show[ing] (and not just tell[ing]) how transformation happens" (7). The text is at the same time broad in scope and rich in depth, offering original and generative analysis on

topics ranging from epistemology and the imagination to pressing political issues of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (including 9/11 and identity politics). Throughout, the theme of transformation is one of the text's prominent and consistent threads. Rather than attempt (and surely fail) to do justice to the many contributions of *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro*, then, in what follows I focus on some of the ways that this text expands on Anzaldúa's earlier work to open up a new philosophy and politics of transformation. In particular, I will discuss how this text creates space to transform notions of identity and philosophy alongside telling and showing us how these processes of transformation are contextual and in-progress.

In her preface, "Gestures of the Body-- Escribiendo para idear," Anzaldúa describes how reading, writing, and other creative acts--including her own practice of writing this text and her readers' engagement with it--open up a distinct space for imagining possibilities beyond our current reality. She describes the "'flights' that reading and writing send us on," as imaginings or *ensueños*, and writes that, in this vein, "this text is about acts of imaginative flight in reality and identity construction and reconstructions" (7). The "imaginative flight" of this text is not a flight from reality, but rather an imaginative transformation of reality, and of the meaning and practice of identity in particular. That is, Anzaldúa's project in this text is to do more than interpret, analyze, and describe how identity is constructed. Her creative philosophical work reimagines, reconstructs, and transforms our own political, social, and philosophical narratives about identity.

But what is the nature of this transformation--of this rewriting--of identity in which Anzaldúa invites us to participate? In the six chapters that follow the preface, Anzaldúa is careful to note that reimagining identity does not mean completely jettisoning existing identity formations or denying the key role they play in the construction of our social realities and lived experiences. She admits that "identity categories--categories based primarily on history, biology, nationality--are important aspects of personal and collective identity," while at the same time she insists that "they don't contain our entirety, and we can't base our whole *identidad* on them" (66). Building on her intersectional projects in previous texts, Anzaldúa carefully accounts for the ways in which race, gender, dis/ability, class, and sexuality interact in the formation of our identities, pushing against "boundaries that have outlived their usefulness" (75). In this vein, in the fourth chapter of her manuscript, entitled "Geographies of Selves-- Reimagining Identity," Anzaldúa critiques nationalistic or essentialistic conceptions of identity as predetermined, static, and hegemonic, and does so without denying the significance of what she calls the "roots" or "subterranean webs" of identity formed by "ancestral/racial origins and biological attributes" (67).

Drawing on this imagery, she describes how this "Arbol de la vida (the tree of life)" symbolizes what she calls "the 'new tribalism.'" This conception offers a new way of approaching contemporary conversations in feminist theory about intersectionality, an account of how identities are multi-rooted and linked and at the same dynamic. In this vein, Anzaldúa writes that "identity is relational. Who and what we are depends on those surrounding us, a mix of our interactions with our *alrededores* environments, with new and old narratives" (69). New tribalism resists nationalistic approaches to identity and identity politics, and at the same time resists anthropocentrism, recognizing "that we are responsible participants in the ecosystems (complete set of interrelationships between a network of living organisms and their physical habitats) in

whose web we're individual strands" (67). Through this work on new tribalism, Anzaldúa contributes to--and intervenes into--contemporary philosophical and political debates about identity and identity politics.

By inviting us, her readers, along as co-workers in the process of transforming identity, Anzaldúa urges us to engage in the difficult practice of attending to the rooted and embodied nature of our identities while at the same time "disrupting the binary oppositions that reinforce relations of subordination and dominance" (79). By rewriting identity as a practice of transformation, Anzaldúa's project rethinks pressing concerns about the meaning and politics of identity in general, and of our own identities in particular. In doing so, she reimagines the complexities and potentialities of personal and social identity in terms of what she describes as the "transformative work that processes and facilitates evolving as a social group" (75). Transformation, then, is not just what we must do to our conceptions of identity, but is the work of identity itself.

By showing and telling us how the process of identity is a practice of reimagining, rewriting, and rethinking, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro* also calls for a transformation of thinking, knowledge, and philosophical practice. In her preface, Anzaldúa writes, "In questioning systems of knowledge" this text is meant to "add or alter their norms" and to "present . . . new theoretical models" (7). A rethinking of what counts as knowledge--and, indeed, of what the practice of theory looks like--is a central contribution of Anzaldúa's previously published texts (including especially *Borderlands/La Frontera*); her critique of dominant ways of knowing and her own epistemology are extended and deepened in this new volume. In chapter 2, "Flights of the Imagination: Rereading/Rewriting Realities," she makes explicit that transforming knowledge and theoretical practice is a project of decolonization. She describes how ways of knowing are reinforced by--and are reinforcing of--oppressive structures of power, and writes that "Decolonizing reality consists of unlearning consensual 'reality,' of seeing through reality's roles and descriptions" (44). Throughout the text, Anzaldúa makes clear that transforming or decolonizing reality means transforming our ways of seeing, describing, understanding, and knowing.

In particular, Anzaldúa establishes in this text that decolonizing knowledge means understanding thinking as an imaginative and embodied practice. Indeed, her discussion of the imagination extends her project from previously published texts to describe how "the imagination opens the road to both personal and societal change" (44). She outlines the "different kinds of imaginings"--including political, spiritual, and aesthetic--that enable a transformation of identity, politics, and knowledge (44). Anzaldúa describes how, together, these practices of imagining make possible what she calls "'other' epistemologies": ways of knowing that exceed and resist dominant theoretical or conceptual models (44). A central element of Anzaldúa's epistemological project in this text is an explicit rethinking of the work of theory as an embodied practice. She makes explicit that "struggling with a 'story' (a concept or a theory) . . . is a bodily activity" (66). By refocusing our attention on the imagination and the body as central to decolonizing knowledge, Anzaldúa calls on us to reconsider our own epistemological assumptions about what is required for and what counts as theoretical work. And, in calling for a transformation of the way we understand--and do--theoretical work, Anzaldúa engages in a kind of philosophical practice that

expands not only the production of diverse kinds of knowledge, but also our understanding of the practice of philosophy itself.

Throughout the text, Anzaldúa is careful to note that the transformative practices she describes and performs are always contextual and in-process. Indeed, in the first pages, she outlines how the monograph is self-critical and self-reflective. She describes the imaginative, bodily, and transformative work of this text as dialogical and by its nature incomplete and in-progress. Still, Anzaldúa is hopeful about the possibility of transformation. In the sixth and final chapter of *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro*, she writes, "Many are witnessing a major cultural shift in their understanding of what knowledge consists of and how we come to know" (119). In the face of what she calls a "personal, global identity crisis" where oppression functions through and with dominant paradigms of knowing and thinking, she sees this shift away from "conventional knowledge's current categories, classifications, and contents" (119). At the same time that she describes this transformative shift, in this final chapter Anzaldúa gives an account of her own journey of transformation. In doing so, she continues the project that she describes in the preface: "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" (7). Her transformative project surrounding identity and philosophy--and her account of her own transformation--are also an invitation to the reader. Indeed, the transformative space opened up by this project is a space where we are called to co-create, to join the project of transforming identity and knowledge.

Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro does nothing short of provide a sort of revisable (and revising) blueprint for the work of feminist philosophy--and, indeed, the work of philosophy more generally. She models a kind of transformative philosophical methodology that resembles her approach to identity in that it employs a web of approaches, perspectives, and influences. Overlapping and interconnected threads form the tangled and nourishing roots of the text. For example, in her description of new tribalism, she draws on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as her own reflection on her lived experiences and personal history. In this way, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro* is a beautiful and radical example of how philosophy itself might be transformed, not only in what it reflects on, but also relative to how we constitute the space and boundaries of philosophical reflection. The publication of this, Anzaldúa's second monograph, is an event that challenges us to transform our own philosophical practice, to call into question what texts can be put into conversation, and what counts as philosophy to begin with: to transform--to decolonize--philosophy.