

“Between the two eyes in her head, the tongueless magical eye and the loquacious rational eye, was *la rajadura*”¹

Camille Back (2020)

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One winter evening in 1980 when they were all living at 948 Noe Street in San Francisco, Gloria Anzaldúa slipped a note beneath Randy P. Conner and David Hatfield Sparks’ door that asked, “Is there a queer spirituality?” Her question and the discussions that followed offer me the chance to examine the theoretical tool of disidentification in light of other concepts developed by Anzaldúa in order to take up – and honor – two aspects that have been especially neglected by academics in the work devoted to her, i.e., her identification as “queer” and the spiritual and esoteric dimension that permeates her life and writing.

José Esteban Muñoz defined disidentification in order to analyze the art practices pursued by queers of color in the United States. The concept aims to describe the survival strategies to which marginalized individuals turn to negotiate their identity and development as subjects in a dominant society that marginalizes or denies their existence. As Muñoz puts it, “Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this ‘working on and against’ is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent cultural change while at the same time valuing the

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, (4th edition), 2012 [1987], 67.

importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.”² In his introduction to *Disidentifications*, Muñoz recognizes Anzaldúa’s major contributions to his own theory while underscoring her own marginalization within current genealogies of queer theories. He encourages us to consider the heritage of *This Bridge Called My Back*. Edited by Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, this anthology stands as a fine example of disidentification as political strategy at odds with earlier feminist strategies, in order to take into account the experiences of women of color who have to negotiate multiple social conflicts and a range of allegiances and affinities:

“I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria, the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. ‘Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement,’ say the members of my race. ‘Your allegiance is to the Third World,’ say my Black and Asian friends. ‘Your allegiance is to your gender, to women,’ say the feminists. Then there’s my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there’s my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? A *third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings*. They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label... Who, me, confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.”³

One of my own experiences of disidentification was forcefully reactivated in my first exchange of emails with Randy P. Conner in April 2018. After assuring me he was prepared to share information touching on the erasure of Anzaldúa’s participation in the emergence of queer theories, he added, “She was SO MUCH MORE than this. For example, you NEVER phoned her during *Star Trek* or *The X Files*, if you are familiar with these shows... So... I would like very much to talk with you, but you might need to visit Chicago.”⁴ His message helped to clarify an important episode in my own development as a lesbian and researcher who negotiated her identity through Dana Scully, a character from the television series *The X-Files*. She is an FBI agent working on unclassified cases involving paranormal phenomena alongside Agent Fox Mulder, with whom she has a relationship that shifts between strong friendship and platonic love. Although

² José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1999, 11-12.

³ Gloria Anzaldúa, “La Prieta,” *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga & Gloria Anzaldúa, Albany: State University of New York Press, (4th edition), 2015 [1981], 205.

⁴ Randy P. Conner, email correspondence, April 2018.

it is likely that *The X-Files* acted quite differently as a disidentification site for Anzaldúa, what does this mutual disidentification of our connections to spirituality, esotericism, mysticism, and the paranormal reveal?

In May 2018, I went to Chicago with my partner the visual artist Celine Drouin Laroche, where Conner and David Hatfield Sparks welcomed us to their home for a few days. To Anzaldúa's burning question, *Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit*, edited by Randy P. Conner, Sparks, and their daughter Mariya Sparks, provides a tentative answer in the affirmative by highlighting queer elements in a broad range of spiritual traditions. In the preface, besides calling into question conventional concepts of what constitutes knowledge, Anzaldúa offers us a survey of the various roles that spirituality (or what she describes as a "spiritual *mestizaje*") has played in her life. Anzaldúa aspired to a spirituality that could embrace the *mestiza* and queer dimensions of her identity. But as *mestiza* and queer, she embraced a spirituality that could not follow one path only; she needed to weave together beliefs and practices that spring from several cultures and various spiritual and esoteric traditions. As Conner pointed out to us, Anzaldúa's beliefs and spiritual practices were eclectic but she tackled them with the same rigor she applied to her university studies. Her spiritual mix included Eastern philosophy, Western esotericism (in particular astrology, *I Ching*, and the Tarot), spiritism and psychic development (remote viewing, astral projection, lucid dreaming), the Yoruba diaspora religion and orishas, indigenous Mexican traditions, and other divinatory, magic and healing technologies.

If Anzaldúa theorized the way she negotiated her development as a subject through multiple identification sites, which could at times be seen as contradictory, in order to embrace a multitude of identity components and entwined social connections, her spirituality rested on a similar process of disidentification. That is to say a necessary disidentification regarding, on the one hand, the patriarchal faith in which she had been raised which was itself built upon the suppression of indigenous Mesoamerican spiritual practices, and on the other, esoteric literature and the emerging literature of the New Age movement, which was heterocentric if not homophobic. Nevertheless, her spiritual and esoteric practices also helped to nurture her concept of "queer," notably through the concept of *la facultad*,⁵ a kind of psychic sense or extrasensory perceptions and heightened awareness that queer subjects are inclined to develop.

⁵ See Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 60-61.

With Anzaldúa and her work, borders are fluid and concepts flow into each other. The queer subject (also pejoratively known as *mita' y mita'*, half-'n'-half, in Chicano Spanish because of a belief in their magical or paranormal ability to change their sex every six months) is like the new *mestiza* (or person of “mixed race,” being “made of half one thing and half another”), who is exposed to multiple cultural and social worlds and faces the merging of several frames of reference that possess their own coherence, although they are usually incompatible among themselves. This queer subject both crosses and bestrides borders and develops the ability and necessary flexibility to serve as a bridge, *nepantleras*⁶ or mediators who facilitate passing between the different spaces which they belong to and help to transform. Rereading *Borderlands* in light of Muñoz's works, I find it particularly interesting to perceive the new *mestiza*, a cross-border subject operating in a negotiation mode, as a disidentifying subject. Is it not possible then to envision the space of the border – borderlands, *la rajadura*, interstices – but also the space of the crossroads and bridge, strategic and potentially transformative spaces, as the privileged spaces of disidentification?

I would like to conclude by underscoring the pragmatic, political dimensions of Anzaldúa's spiritual *mestizaje*. Her spirituality was simultaneously a way of knowing the world, a resource, and a survival technique; it was grounded in a deep desire for personal and social transformation. It enabled her to resist the various forms of oppression she had experienced by helping her develop a greater sense of her own agency. In 1980, discouraged by the separatist and anti-spiritual biases of the various social movements she was involved in, Anzaldúa founded El Mundo Zurdo (The Left-Handed World), which began as a series of readings by feminists, activists and thinkers of color, and queers. Determined to bring together radical politics and a spiritual antihegemonist vision – the left being associated with the political left, and the left hand with esotericism, the occult, and magic – she sought to advance a new “spiritual activism,” and here again disidentification comes into play. As an invitation to go beyond the binary oppositional frameworks that structure the formation of our identities and our social struggles, spiritual activism consists of transforming our material conditions of existence by reacting not solely through the traditional practice of spirituality or the technologies of political activism, but rather by a blending of the two in order to facilitate the development of new tactics for survival, resistance, and transformation. To me it is obvious that the spiritual dimension of Anzaldúa's work contributed to the suppression of her role in the emergence of queer theories. Academics tend to dismiss

⁶ Term coined by Anzaldúa from the Nahuatl word *nepantla* (literally “in-between space”).

spirituality from academic discussions and condemn work that touches on it as “essentialist.” That is what led us in part, after returning home, to make a film, *Something to Do with the Dark*, and develop workshops around spiritual activism in non-university spaces.

I began this essay by recounting how the Dana Scully character spoke to me as a lesbian and a researcher. Let’s get back to Scully. First of all, she is forced to work with Mulder by his superiors with the sole aim of slowing down and discrediting his investigation, yet she soon finds herself swept up in her partner’s passion. Despite her rational, skeptical nature, she comes to question the logical thinking she has assimilated in her studies and life, and little by little becomes a steadfast ally. As I advanced in my writing, Scully appeared to me to be an especially productive disidentification site through which my identity as a researcher and my research practice could be negotiated. Numerous people have played the role of Fox Mulder in my development, beginning with my partner, Randy P. Conner, David Hatfield Sparks, and Anzaldúa herself, awakening me to the spiritual and esoteric dimension that structured her daily life, creative process, activism, and theories. To do research the way Scully investigates x-files, those unsolved cases, has meant working on unexplained phenomena that are on the margins of university concerns or are eventually shelved and forgotten – the deletion of Anzaldúa’s contributions from the period when queer theories were emerging. It has meant showing a willingness to dwell on the margins. Interrogating my own resistance and my own attraction, both full of contradictions, to spirituality and esotericism, and recognizing, like a new *mestiza*, like Scully, at a certain moment, that “between the two eyes in [my] head, the tongueless magical eye and the loquacious rational eye, was *la rajadura*, the abyss that no bridge could span.”⁷ Here lies the task of *nepantleras*, and disidentification is one of the precious tools that enable them to serve as mediators.

⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 67.