

Woman wants a spiritual home. Gloria Anzaldua and Maxine Hong Kingston are part of a movement towards a feminist spirituality in their loosely autobiographical works, Borderlands / La Frontera and The Woman Warrior. They seek to find within their originating cultures which grossly devalue women, the matter upon which they can work transformations which give meaning to their lives. The desire to communicate this process informs their work, seeking to bring to people who have not shared their experiences a tour of their spiritual territory.

Feminist spirituality is the spontaneous and various outpouring of women who are moved to religious experience but not surprisingly find no comfortable space in male dominated and designed faiths. Ranging from Christian and Jewish to New Age philosophy and Witchcraft, it has been broadly stated that “whatever works to make a woman stronger is valid feminist spirituality” (Eller 3), but frequent emphases have been noted within the variety of views. In general the movement includes reverence of the female, of nature and of ritual (Eller 3). In addition to commonplace notions that religion should provide an explanation of the human condition, it has been stated that feminist notions of theology must strike a deep chord within the experience of being female and fight sexist and racist injustices, so overlapping with political feminism (Christ 319). Plaskow and Christ delineate the central issues involved:

The need for a positive past with which feminists can identify, the search for new ways to image and speak about the sacred, the effort to redefine the self and to transform a patriarchal world (9).

Using these broad categories of imperatives for feminist spirituality, I will look at how Anzaldua and Kingston's autobiographical melanges work through those tasks as they chart the course of the author's spiritual quest.

Kingston has no illusions that aspects of Chinese culture as experienced by her family are antithetical to the aspirations of women. "There is no lost paradise, not in China the mythical homeland" (Rabine 477) for Kingston, so finding neither a home nor a suitable religion there she transforms what she has found. She reworks old myths and unleashes a few of her own to find within her Chinese heritage affirming images of women upon which to build her own desires. The story of Fa Mu Lan is originally a story well known to Chinese children in which duty to family is emphasised, specifically in the heroine taking her Father's place in battle (Cheung 242). Kingston makes a very positive identification of the heroine's female nature not found in the original gender neutral tale. Merely being a woman warrior is an act of heroism in a myth where Chinese executed such creatures (Tusmith 256). Her battlefield confinement is idealised and celebrated as one with the Cosmos:

I hid from battle only once, when I gave birth to our baby. In dark and silver dreams I had seen him falling from the sky, each night closer to the earth, his soul a star. Just before labour began, the last star rays sank into my belly. (42)

This high affirmation of the fecundity of woman is contrasted nicely with the earthbound "What are we going to do with this?" (42) from the

husband, who will nonetheless take the child to allow the heroic warrior to escape being a slave to child rearing and allow her to fulfill her destiny.

The story of Ts'ai Yen is appropriated to provide a positive past for a Chinese woman amongst the barbarians. She is a poetess, alone in an alien culture, who is so moved and disturbed by the song of her captors that she adapts her voice to the alien noise to communicate her sadness and anger. The creation of beauty from suffering is advanced as a positive consequence of torment, albeit a melancholy and incomplete one.

Kingston's great grandfather Bak Goong can make up new customs based on old stories because "we're the founding ancestors of this place" (China Men 118). Kingston claims that her creation of myth from the stuff of her family history came unnoticed due to "writing about them from a distance" (Thompson 9). Her mythopoesis of her mother Brave Orchid, one of the founding ancestors of America, as Shaman, is a strong image of one who can command ghosts in a country where such a skill seems essential, and yet has studied a "Western" scientific profession. While the dramatic focus of the tale is the fight with the Sitting Ghost, there is a real sense of the numinous in the opening ritual of the opening of the scrolls (57). While the diplomas are the recognition of learning and rationality, Kingston invests them with the religious awe akin to ancient manuscripts. She has three scrolls, eight seals and she lists them after the manner of St. John of the Apocalypse. Even the smell is invested with significance:

A thousand-year-old bat flying heavy-headed out of the
Chinese caverns where bats are as white as dust, a smell that
comes from long ago, far back in the brain. (57)

Just as her swordswoman is a heroine to whom being a woman is no
impediment to courage, and “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” tries to find
meaning in suffering, in her myth of the Shaman, the possibility of accepting
Western rationalism and Chinese mystery as both being versions of truth is
advanced.

Anzaldúa specifically sets out to provide a positive past for her Chicana
heritage and her sex. Rewriting ethnocentric history is the major thrust of
“The Homeland”, the opening chapter of the book, and is reinforced by the
poems.

Don't give in *mi prietita*
tighten your belt, endure.
Your lineage is ancient,
your roots like those of the mesquite
firmly planted, digging underground
toward that current, the soul of *tierra madre* □
your origin. (“Don't Give In, *Chicanita*” 1-7)

While she has as much sexism to battle in her culture as Kingston, the
task of finding a positive past for her people here differs from that in The
Woman Warrior where Maxine is faced with thousands of years of arcane
culture. Anzaldúa is working to empower a culturally young people written off
as “squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the
mulato...” (3). By giving history from her own perspective and affirming the
age-old nature of their Indian and other forebears, she tries to free herself of
the slurs of the dominant Anglo culture.

Anzaldua finds her identity in the “Indian woman’s history of resistance” (21).

The Aztec female rites of mourning were rites of defiance protesting the cultural changes which disrupts the equality and balance between female and male, and protesting their demotion to a lesser status, their denigration. Like *la Llorona*, the Indian’s woman’s only means of protest was wailing. (21)

Salvidar-Hull brings the tradition forward to the experience of specifically Chicana feminists themselves as the positive past which allows transformation of the present (305). Anzaldua mines this ore in “that dark shining thing”:

I am the only round face,
Indian-beaked, off-colored
in the faculty lineup, the workshop, the panel
and reckless enough to take you on...

Here we are four women stinking with guilt
you for not speaking your names
me for not holding out my hand sooner. (17-20,51-3)

Kingston finds new ways of looking at the sacred, when she locates meaningful motifs in her life as she leads it. Her use of lines of descent is illustrative. Ancestor worship was a tool in the maintenance of patrilineal descent (Rabine 484). For Kingston, her “No Name Woman” gives her “ancestral help” if she can “see her life branching into mine”(16). Her’s is an alternative line of descent for ignored woman. The students at the Midwifery school:

had to figure out how to help my mother's spirit locate the To Kueng School as 'home'. The calling out of her real descent line would have led her to the wrong place, the village... They called out their own names, women's pretty names, haphazard names, horizontal names of one generation. They pieced together new directions, and my mother's spirit followed them instead of the old footprints. (73)

The alternative descent line also therefore includes the here and now and the seemingly trivial as well as the ancestors. In *China Men*, Maxine feels at home hiding from her uncle in the dark cellar (Rabine 480). With the footsteps overhead, farm animals audible outside, surrounded by old clothes, crates from China, a childhood swing and time to think about "wishes ,wands [and] hibernation" (181), she collects images that connect and feel like home.

Brave Orchid found a slave whose pulse matched "the sounds of the earth-sea-sky" (77). Anzaldua finds the sacred in nature by emphasising her feeling of the merging of nature, geography and person. The border itself is a wound felt intensely and personally:

dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
 running down the length of my body,
 staking fence rods in my flesh,
 splits me splits me (*El otro M—xico* 41-4)

Such wounds give her the access she needs to "fashion my own gods out of my entrails" (22). Both physical pain and illness, and the pain of her oppression on grounds of race, sex and sexual orientation make Anzaldua sensitive to deeper realities. She feels the foreknowledge of danger, the presence of her ancestors, and is receptive to archetypes from her Aztec heritage like *Coatlicue*, the Serpent goddess and the Earth Mother (38-9,46). She recovers *Le Virgen de Guadalupe* from a Catholicism which used it as an

instrument of oppression and which she finds seriously incomplete and distrustful of visceral experience (31,38).

Both Anzaldua and Kingston redefine the self through the act of writing. They rebel against a culture of silence by becoming storytellers defying the circumstances which have attempted to deflect their calling. For Anzaldua “wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” (54). Maxine’s mother is accused: “you tried to cut off my tongue” (180), but retorts it was just to loosen it. America is not like China where “a ready tongue is an evil” (148).

Kingston locates aspects of her life in America within the myths she has appropriated from the past and her forebears. She puts grievances on the warrior’s back and in Maxine’s mouth and reprises the warrior’s battles herself against petty racists and tyrants. The clever slave girl’s deception which ensures Brave Orchid gets her at a good price is paralleled with Maxine’s deliberate deterring of potential husbands. The hated uncle says the same of girls as the Baron whom the Warrior beheads. Kingston also jokingly associates sweaters and chocolate chip cookies with the Chinese warrior. The training the warrior receives is, in Maxine’s real life, the stories her mother told her.

Brave Orchid’s stories were “to grow up on” (13), and often consequently brutal in the hope her children would survive the trauma of living amongst the ghosts. When not grotesquely didactic they were ambiguous enough for Maxine’s grievances to include the claim that “you lie with your stories” (180). The mature author Kingston, however, has become of the same

ilk as her mother. She has come to the insight that fiction can be truer than non-fiction (Thompson 7).

Anzaldua makes a defining sacrament of writing, involving ritual and pain and producing pieces which live in performance, which becomes enacting a rite (67). In her own performance of poetry she finds herself “at home” with a viscerally receptive audience (Anzaldua “To(o) Queer the Writer” 255). She defines herself as the Shaman, the Singer, “her whole life enslaved to that devouring mouth” (69,75).

Kingston admits that transforming the whole world is too great a task:

To avenge my family, I'd have to storm across China to take our farm from the communists; I'd have to rage across the United states to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California. Nobody in history has conquered and united North America and Asia. A descendant of eighty pole fighters, I ought to... get going right now.” (50)

She has charted her own transformation from child to one who can talk story like her mother, but has no great overarching plan to save the world from patriarchy. She looks to little actions of affirmation where she is, and perhaps marching at Berkeley. She hints that she is not keen on the idea of woman dominating men, or anyone dominating anyone. Her doubting the reality of “witch amazons” who killed males would disappoint some feminists (47). Kingston is quoted as saying:

I feel I have gone as deeply into men's psyches as I can, and I don't find them that different. I care about men... as much as I care about women (Kim in Rabine 476).

One universal idea that she does throw up in the last chapter is the concept of translatability of experience. Ts'ai Yen's words mean nothing to the barbarians, but they catch her melancholy fury. The tune is a barbarian song but the Chinese can play it on their instruments and "it translated well"(186). The translation may not give the whole effect but it can catch something of it, and that makes the exercise worthwhile. If The Woman Warrior is more than a guidebook for first generation Chinese-American's, and it of course is much more, then I am grateful that she could see past her anger so that her talking story makes the effort to educate me.

Anzaldua insists on control of translation. After setting the ground rules in the preface, she gradually increases the non-English content, as if reaching out to teach us her patois. But when she does translate it is often unreliable paraphrases of the Chicana text (Fishkin 167). What she does not translate in Borderlands she does elsewhere, thus obscuring her agenda. Do readers of her contribution of a chapter from Borderlands to an anthology of feminist spiritualism have to meet her less than halfway linguistically, compared to those of complete text itself, as she inserts extra translation to the anthologised fragment? (Anzaldua, "Entering the Serpent" 77) Her otherwise obvious need to communicate suggests that her desire for control has less to do with empowering language than with her condescending attitude towards monolingual English speakers. _

Transforming the patriarchal world is something for which Anzaldua has a program. Not content with empowerment of her culture and herself she advances the possibility of unity in a borderland consciousness:

Because I, a *mestiza*,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time
(A Struggle of Borders 1-4)

This is not true. Anzaldua has a massive blind spot due to justifiable anger at the treatment her people have received from the dominant Anglo culture. She has a tolerance for everything except the heritage of the dominant culture and this fatally undermines her concept of the Mestiza consciousness. What she fears she generalises and so marginalises those who may share much of her thinking but are fortunate/unfortunate enough not to live on her particular borderland. She repeatedly presents a caricature of Western culture as consisting of “white sterility” (69) and “Cartesian split point of view”(68), and rejects it, as if nothing existed pre-enlightenment in the west to match her brand of spirituality, or that no-one other than oppressed Chicana could have the insight that there are other ways of seeing other than pure rationalism. Despite her supposed embrace of ambiguity, when it comes to race she cannot transcend the them-us duality (Bruce-Novoa 33). Statements like “the people who practice Racism□everyone who is white in the U.S.□are victims of their own white ideology” (“Haciendo caras, una entrada” 5) are undermined by the same sort of generalisation that makes the statement “all Mexicans are lazy”

abhorrent. Having so persuasively drawn the reader into her discovery of where she is spiritually, through an exploration of the positive aspects of her own culture, it is a little awkward that she, instead of encouraging Anglos to find the empowering, the positive, the accepting, non-patriarchal aspects in their own culture, lectures them on why her culture is superior to theirs (69). Such infuriating claims lead to reaction that she is a “professional Aztec” (Reiff 42) proposing utopian solutions divorced from reality. More rigorous criticism suggests:

Anzaldua’s final utopic projection attempts to install the *mestiza* beyond distinction and demarcation, as the harbinger of a global miscegenation and hybridization which eliminates forever the possibility of difference and separation. In this sense, Borderlands replicates the mechanisms of defence that it critiques... This nostalgia for the border and the *mestiza* as the site of a utopic intermixture, hybridization and confluence merely inverts the privileging, in the discourse of colonialism, of the slash of the border as the site of taxonomic closure (Jagose 213).

Anzaldua in this context has become “too universal and humanitarian ...invoking the eternal to the sacrifice of the particular and the feminine and the specific historical moment”(Anzaldua, “Speaking in Tongues” 170).

Such problems of generalisation also effect her view of men. While gay men get grudging empathy, straights are at best “confused”, “isolated” and “scattered” when they don’t fit the oppressive norm she generalises for the sex (84). Writing off large sections of the world, whether or not they belong to a group accused of injustice, does not fit with a universal inclusiveness, but rather accentuates the narrowness of her vision. Feminist spirituality is engaged in debate as to whether males can be included in any form (Eller 4),

and these two authors would appear to be on opposite sides of the acceptance versus rejection debate. The point, however, is not that feminist notions of spirituality can't exclude men, but that it is problematic to press notions of universal claims if that path is chosen. If such a *Mestiz̃a* as Anzaldua's could perhaps exist, all the straights, all the Anglos and, incidentally, all those not involved in the local politics of the American continent, would be on the borderlands of it.

Kingston's less overtly spiritual life story achieves its brilliance by its juxtaposition of the possible and the practical with the transcendent. By limiting her spiritual journey to the story she heard and admitting there are other stories (Thompson 12), and by her zeal to communicate she succeeds in translating her experience of what she wants spiritually. Anzaldua's epic reclamation of feminist archetypes from Aztec religion and Mexican-American history overreaches itself when it pretends to ultimate authority, and thus she undermines her insights by forgetting she is not my goddess but her own. Both authors, however, illustrate the creative thrust of feminist spirituality and seek to communicate the spiritual "home of their own" that they desire.

Works Consulted

- Adams, Kate. "Northamerican Silences: History, Identity, and Witness in the Poetry of Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, and Leslie Marmon Silko." Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism. Eds. Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. New York: Oxford U P, 1994. 130-45.
- Anzaldua, Gloria. Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987.
- Anzaldua, Gloria. "Entering the Serpent." Plaskow and Christ 77-91.
- Anzaldua, Gloria. "Haciendo caras, una entrada." Making Face, Making Soul. Ed. Gloria Anzaldua. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990. 1-14.
- Anzaldua, Gloria. "Speaking in Tongues." This Bridge Called My Back. Ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua. Watertown, MA: Persephone, 1981. 165-173.
- Anzaldua, Gloria. "To(o) Queer the Writer." Inversions. Ed. Betsy Warland. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1991. 249-63.
- Anzaldua, Gloria and Ellie Hernandez. "Re-Thinking Margins and Borders: An Interview." Discourse 18 (1995-6): 7-15.
- Bacchilega, Cristina. "Feminine Voices Inscribing Sarraute's Childhood and Kingston's The Woman Warrior." Textual Practice 6 (1992): 101-18.
- Bruce-Novoa. "The US-Mexican Border in Chicano Testimonial Writing: A Topological Approach to Four Hundred and Fifty Years of Writing the Border." Discourse 18 (1995-6): 32-53.
- Cheung, King-Kok. "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" Conflicts in Feminism. Eds. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller. New York: Routledge, 1990. 234-51.
- Christ, Carol P. "Rethinking Theology and Nature." Plaskow and Christ 314-25.
- Chu, Patricia " 'The Invisible World the Emigrants Built': Cultural Self-Inscription and the Antiromantic Plots of The Woman Warrior." Diaspora 2 (1992): 95-115.

- Cordoba, Maria-Socorro Tabuenca, "Viewing the Border: Perspectives from 'the Open Wound.'" Discourse 18 (1995-6): 146-68.
- Eller, Cynthia. Living in the Lap of the Goddess. New York: Crossroad, 1993.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher, "The Borderlands of Culture: Writing by W.E.B. Dubois, James Agee, Tillie Olsen, and Gloria Anzaldua." Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century. Ed. Norman Sims. New York: Oxford U P, 1990. 133-72.
- Fong, Bobby. "Maxine Hong Kingston's Autobiographical strategy in The Woman Warrior." Biography 12 (1989): 116-26.
- Irzok, Sibel. "Maxine Hong Kingston: Languages and Silences of Being Chinese-American." Journal of American Studies of Turkey 1 (1995): 57-63.
- Jagose, Annamarie. "Slash and Suture: Post/colonialism in Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza." Feminism and the Politics of Difference. Eds. Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman. St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1993. 212-27.
- Johnston, Sue Ann. "Empowerment Through Mythological Imaginings in Woman Warrior." Biography 16 (1993): 136-46.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. China Men. New York: Borzoi, 1980.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts. London: Picador, 1981.
- Melchior, Bonnie. "A Marginal 'T': The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior." Biography 17 (1994): 281-95.
- Miller, Margaret. "Threads of Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior." Biography 6 (1983): 13-29.
- Plaskow, Judith and Christ, Carol P. eds. Weaving the Visions. San Francisco: Harper, 1989.
- Rabine, Leslie W. "No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston." Signs 12 (1987): 471-92.

- Rabinowitz, Paula. "Eccentric Memories: A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston." Michigan Quarterly Review 26 (1987): 177-87.
- Reiff, David. "Professional Aztecs and Popular Culture." New Perspectives Quarterly 8 (1991): 42-5.
- Thompson, Phyllis Hoge. "This is the Story I Heard: A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston and Earl King." Biography 6 (1983): 1-12.
- Tusmith, Bonnie. "Literary Tricksterism: Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts." Literature Interpretation Theory 2 (1991): 249-59.

