

4 | Geographies of Selves—Reimagining Identity

Nos/Otras (Us/Other), las Nepantleras, and the New Tribalism

Amor es . . . amar la plenitude del árbol . . .
en el ansia de la semilla ciega
que perdió el rumbo de la luz,
Aprisionada por su tierra,
vencida por su misma tierra.
DULCE MARIA LOYNAZ, “AMOR ES”

Reimagining identities

My body is sexed; I can't avoid that reality, although I could change it through transgendering or transsexing.¹ My body is raced; I can't escape that reality, can't control how other people perceive me, can't de-race, e-race my body, or the reality of its raced-ness. U.S. society is gendered and racialized; it expects certain behavior from women, certain bearings from men, certain comportment from queer mujeres, certain demeanor from queer hombres, certain conduct from disabled, and so on. If you're a person of color, those expectations take on more pronounced nuances due to the traumas of racism and colonization. Though there are aspects of gender, sexual, and racial identity that no single person can change, together we can alter cultural beliefs,

behaviors, attitudes about their meanings. These identity categories—categories based primarily on history, biology, nationality—are important aspects of personal and collective identity; however, they don't contain our entirety, and we can't base our whole *identidad* on them. It's not "race,"² gender, class, or any single attribute but the interaction of all of these aspects (as well as others) that creates identity.

For me, being Chicana is not enough—nor is being queer, a writer, or any other identity label I choose or others impose on me. Conventional, traditional identity labels are stuck in binaries, trapped in *jaulas* (cages) that limit the growth of our individual and collective lives. We need fresh terms and open-ended tags that portray us in all our complexities and potentialities. When I think of "moving" from a sexed, racialized body to a more expansive identity interconnected with its surroundings, I see in my mind's eye trees with interconnected roots (subterranean webs). When I was a child I felt a kinship to a large mesquite.

El mesquite and its gnarled limbs reign over the portal, the house, and the yard. Its fifty- or sixty-foot-deep roots tap the same underground water source as the windmill. When she [Prieta] stays still long enough her feet worm themselves like roots into the moist core, forming an umbilicus that connects her to el cenote, la noria interior, and to the earth and all its creatures.—“El Paisano Is a Bird of Good Omen”

El árbol de la vida—la Virgen de Guadalupe's tree

Struggling with a "story" (a concept or theory), embracing personal and social identity, is a *bodily* activity. The narrative works itself through my physical, emotional, and spiritual bodies, which emerge out of and are filtered through the natural, spiritual worlds around me. Tengo una ancia como la de "la semilla ciega / que perdió el rumbo de la luz." Nature is my solace; it allows my imagination to stir. Sea, wind, trees evoke images, feelings, thoughts that I acknowledge as sacred. If I'm receptive, a new *conocimiento*/insight will flash up through the cracks of the unconscious, what I call *el cenote, la noria interior*, a subterranean reservoir of personal and collective knowledge. Its surge provokes a new clarity inspiring me to formulate ideas that may transform my daily existence.

Today I walk to the ocean, to my favorite tree, what I call la Virgen's tree.³ Most days, I put my arms around the tree and we have una "platica" (talk), but today I straddle and stretch out on la Virgen's gnarly protruding roots, thick as a horse's back, absorbing the tree's energy, in kinship with it. Al espíritu del árbol I pray for strength, energy, and clarity to fuel este trabajo artistico. In return le hago una promesa: to offer it un milagrito.⁴ With my back against its trunk, I meditate, allowing it to absorb my body into its being; my arms become its branches, my hair its leaves, its sap the blood that flows in my veins. I look at the broken and battered raíces dangling down the edge of the cliff, then stare up at the trunk. I listen to the sea breathing us in and out with its wet sucking sounds, feel the insects burrow into our skin, observe the birds hopping from rama to rama, sense people taking shade under our arms.

El árbol de la vida (the tree of life⁵) symbolizes my "story" of the new tribalism.⁶ Roots represent ancestral/racial origins and biological attributes; branches and leaves represent the characteristics, communities, and cultures that surround us, that we've adopted, and that we're in intimate conversation with. Onto the trunk de mi árbol de la vida I graft a new tribalism. This new tribalism, like other new Chicano/Latino narratives, recognizes 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.⁷

I must forsake "home" (comfort zones, both personal and cultural) every day of my life to keep burgeoning into the tree of myself. Luckily, the roots of my tree are deep enough in la cultura mexicana and strong enough to support a widespread branch system.⁸ Las raíces that sustain and nourish me are implanted in the landscape of my youth, my grandmother's stories of la Llorona, my father's quiet strength, the persevering energy de la gente who work in the fields. I lived the first seven years of my life in a house with dirt floors. Los ranchos de mi tierra (Jesús María y Los Verjeles) cradled me and gave me strong Mexican indigenous roots embedded in preconquest tierra. For some, home-ethnic roots may not be as clear-cut as those connected to the land, nor as portable and potable as the diasporic roots clinging to immigrants' feet and carried from one community, culture, or country to another. Some immigrants are cut off from ethnic cultures. Como cabezas decapitadas, they search for the "home" where all the pieces of

the fragmented body cohere and integrate like Coyolxauhqui.⁹ Many urban, multiethnic people, as well as others adopted out of their racial group, have mixed or tangled, distant or mangled roots. Others, like Richard Rodriguez (known for his anti-bilingualism stance), have in some respect severed their raíces. Many try to recuperate their roots by becoming the most ardent Chicanas or Salvadoreñas, etc., turning into border patrols bearing rigid nationalistic tendencies.

Regardless, *cada uno somos una semillita del árbol de la Raza*. Roots are embedded not only in the soil but also in inner city asphalt and in the spirit, psyche, incorporeal ground of being. We're not just the individual or material árbol de la vida that is our life; we are also *las cosas y gente que pasan a nuestros alrededores*, whether these be concrete metropolis or green environments. To partake of the new tribalism, you don't have to be connected to your home-ethnicity; other root systems will suffice. The "root" you connect to becomes your spiritual ground of being, your connection to your inner self, which is your greatest strength. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use a similar structural model, the rhizome, for the self. They define it as "an underground stem composed of segments that . . . connect freely and unrestrictedly with one another. . . . Unlike a plant with a single tap root, rhizomes spread in all directions, creating a . . . network in which every point can be connected to every other point."¹⁰

Geographies of Selves

She feels the world gradually slip inside her, first the streets, then the skyscrapers. As though from a distance she, herself, closes in on her body and slips inside herself. Her body glows, thickens, expands. But no, her body is the same. It is she who extends in all directions, who is both inside and outside her body. She feels present, feels visible in the world. She's in the gestures of the body, in its movements. Her heart palpitations soothe her. She thinks of it as her guardian animal beating its wings inside her chest, soothing away the pain. She, the watcher, watches the inner dweller, and watches itself watching the others. She is full of people. Ella es gente, y no una sola persona. Why hadn't she realized this before?

"SUSTO," IN LOS ENSUENSU DE LA PRIETA

The places where I've lived have had an impact on my psyche, left a mark on every cell in my body. As a queer Chicana living in New York City in a Puerto Rican neighborhood, surrounded by Russians, Jews,

and other “racially” different peoples, I bore my “differentness” and negotiated my identity. Like others, I’ve had to pick and choose among competing definitions and categorizations of otherness. Along with the roar of the N train rushing from Brooklyn to Manhattan and the reek of urine in the subways, I carried the processes and experiences negotiated by my urban self when I moved on.

After speaking at a conference in Houston, I flew south to the Rio Grande Valley. (Yes, on a “real” plane, not an astral flight.) Through the Plexiglas I peer down at the long arc of the Gulf of Mexico shoreline made jagged by estuaries and deltas of rivers that deposit sands washed down from higher inland grounds. These sands become mud and eventually form barrier islands along the entire coast. Over my left shoulders I can see the long thin body of Padre Island. The plane banks to the right. The citrus, corn, and vegetable fields stretch in long lines, swell into squares and rectangles framed by palm trees. The plane descends into Harlingen. As soon as my feet touch the ground, I know I am on Chicanoland. As I walk on the bedrock of this timeless land of bronzed faces, a tribal sense of belonging, of continuity surges up.—“Interviewing Remedios,” in Los ensueños de la Prieta

Strands/Webs of identity

Our bodies are geographies of selves made up of diverse, bordering, and overlapping “countries.”¹¹ We’re each composed of information, billions of bits of cultural knowledge superimposing many different categories of experience. Like a map with colored web lines of rivers, highways, lakes, towns, and other landscape features *en donde pasan y cruzan las cosas*, we are “marked” (see figure 4.1).¹² Life’s whip makes welts and thin silver scars on our backs; our genetic code digs creases and tracks on our flesh. As our bodies interact with internal and external, real and virtual, past and present environments, people, and objects around us, we weave (*tejemos*), and are woven into, our identities. Identity, as consciously and unconsciously created, is always in process—self interacting with different communities and worlds.

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. Identity is multilayered, stretching in all directions, from past to present, vertically and horizontally, chronologically and spatially. People’s mass movements



4.1 | Geography of Self

across neighborhoods, states, countries, and continents, as well as the instant connection via satellites, Internet, and cell phones, make us more aware of and linked to each other. Soon our consciousness will reach other planets, solar systems, galaxies. Pictured like a diagrammatic model, the universe is a web—tightly woven connections of all living things past, present, and future, containing both positive and negative forces.

I see Raza as a set of attitudes, expectations with no geographical limits. The terrain, the planes (and plains) of identity alter when a person moves (immigrates) into another community or social position. One ends up living in a different physical and symbolic environment while retaining the former “home” culture and position. After leaving the home culture’s familiar cocoon, you occupy other ideological spaces, begin seeing reality in new ways, questioning both the native culture’s and the new culture’s descriptions of reality. The new culture, like the old one, inculcates you with its values and worldviews. Like immigrants, those in the academy find themselves constantly trafficking in different and often contradictory class and cultural locations; they find themselves in the cracks between the world (see figure 4.2).

In the cracks between the worlds; dwelling in liminalities

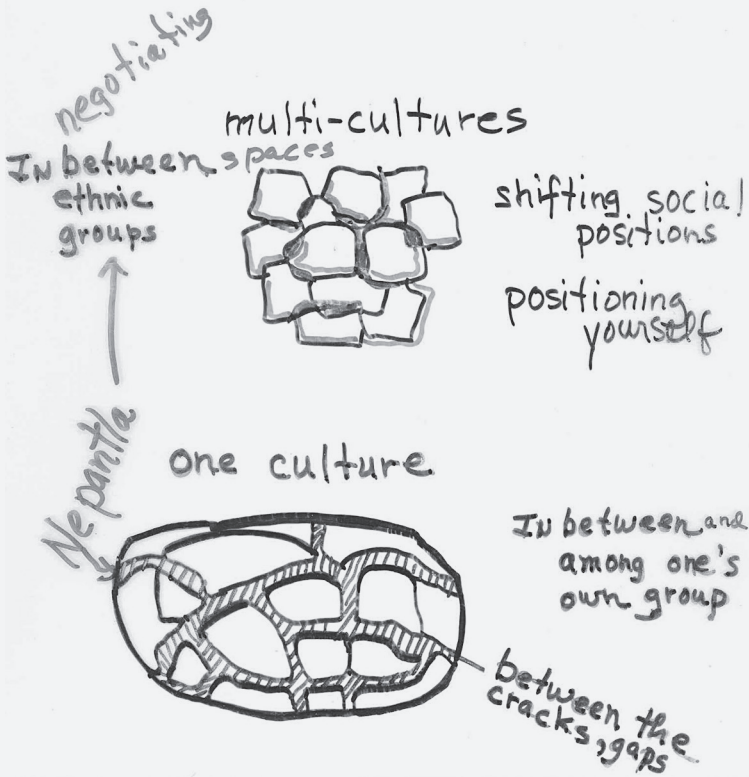
Negotiating with borders results in *mestizaje*, the new hybrid, the new *mestiza*, a new category of identity.¹³ *Mestizas* live in between different worlds, in *nepantla*. We are forced (or choose) to live in categories that defy binaries of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Living in intersections, in cusps, we must constantly operate in a negotiation mode.

Mestizas don’t fit with the norm. Depending on the degree of cultural hybridization, we are caught between cultures and can simultaneously be insiders, outsiders, and other-siders. You may think, “I’m the only one who’s different. I’m the only one who lives between the cracks.” You may be a blond, light-skinned Latina; a red-haired Jew; a blue-eyed Asian; a *gringa* who grew up in Mexico and speaks perfect Spanish; a Chicana dyke who’s lost her tongue and ethnicity but doesn’t feel she belongs in the white lesbian community. Some may be vulnerable to social inequities, while others can “pass” as members of Euro-American cultures. Possessing more than one heritage, people

Mestisaje

4

mixed heritage, many cultures



of mixed races are often pressured to choose one tribe over another or to adhere to standards of ethnicity that are often contradictory, such as being too Mexican or not Mexican enough. People who refuse to pick sides and identify exclusively with one group trouble the majority, disturbing the dominant discourse of race, just as bisexuals trouble that of sexuality, transpeople confound that of gender. Cracks in the discourses are like tender shoots of grass, plants pushing against the fixed cement of disciplines and cultural beliefs, eventually overturning the cement slabs.

Constant trafficking, negotiating, and dialoguing across borders results in a profound new *mestizaje*, one that transgresses the biological and encompasses cultural mixtures. This new *mestizaje* eschews the racial hierarchies inherent in older *mestizaje*. We do not allow ourselves to shelter in simplistic colonialist notions of racial difference, exclusionary boundaries, and binaries (such as other-insider). We must unchain identity from meanings that can no longer contain it; we must move beyond externalized forms of social identity and location such as family, race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, nationality.

War of identities (and cultural meanings)—when our tribes are legion

Composed of numerous Latino groups en conocimiento y desconocimiento (knowledge and ignorance) of each other's histories, cultures, and experiences, and with vast differences among us, we live *entremedios* in a tense balance with each other and with other groups.¹⁴ Immersed *entreguerras*—in collisions and conflicts with those bearing different views—we perpetuate mental and emotional violence against each other. *Somos semilla ciegas que han perdido el rumbo de la luz*. Disquieted by fears that some “other” will take whatever small or great privileges we have garnered, those of us in academia compete furiously, often turning our backs on our own *gente* and “biting at our shadows” (to borrow Wendy Rose’s words from “For My People”). Yet because we’re forced to deal with interracial conflicts and negotiate our numerous and varied social positions in the cracks between realities/*mundos*, we may access experiences and abilities that can catapult us into creating innovative, inclusive identities. This could be our moment in history, when we clarify collective and personal vision and purpose, transcending the “us” versus “them”

dichotomy inscribed by society or psychology. Our steps have carried us to the brink of a great cultural understanding and awakening, of giving ourselves over to, *de entregarnos a, las nuevas concepciones acerca de identidad.*

To re-image identity in new ways requires that we change the focus of the lens trained on our faces and shift our perceptions. It requires letting go of the old identifications and behaviors. The who-we-are is currently undergoing disintegration and reconstruction, pulled apart, dismembered, then reconstructed—a process I envision symbolized by Coyolxauhqui. It may be necessary to adopt some type of pan-ethnic term other than “Latino” (given to us by mainstream media) or “Chicano/Latino” (cumbersome at best). To derive an appropriate pan-ethnic term we need to identify our common conditions and our different circumstances while honoring our diversity. We must explore the ramifications of what we’re becoming and confront the shadow beasts that color the realities of our times before being totally subsumed under any broad social category or totally homogenized by the dominant culture. To continue *la herencia que la huelga estudiantil de 1968* in the U.S. and Mexico *nos dejó* tenemos que re-pensar (we need to rethink) *nuestra identidad racial y escribir new identity narratives.*

Our various histories of *mestizaje*, and the contradictions inherent in the term and its mixtures, give us the ability and flexibility—the tools necessary—to realize great changes in personal and collective identity. Like corn, a primary staple of Mexicans and *indígenas*, *mestizos* have been, and continue to be, subject to genetic mixtures and extensive hybridity.¹⁵ But we find our sense of self threatened by our shadow aspects and by the very liminal spaces (*las nepantlas*) we inhabit, aspects and spaces with the potential to push us into new avenues of growth. Like other new Raza narratives, mine are replete with contradictions, riddled with cracks. Though these holes allow light/insights to enter, they also cast shadows. Acknowledging and exploring *estas sombras* is more difficult when I myself have created them, and I risk reducing the complexities of race and culture. I’m always, already, a traitor *por escribir y por mi lengua*, and rewriting cultural narratives makes me even more of a *malinchista*.

Rewriting identity

To protect ourselves from oppressors, we idealize and hesitate to criticize Raza. We exclude from the vast geographies, from the round disk of wholeness, the concerns of the smaller groups and the issues of women. The inner, personal, and intrapersonal conflicts and misperceptions among women and men, queer and straight, are basically struggles of identity. It's not race, gender, class, sexuality, or any single aspect of the self that determines identity but the interaction of all these aspects plus as yet unnamed features. We discover, uncover, create our identities as we interrelate with others and our alrededores/surroundings. Identity grows out of our interactions, and we strategically reinvent ourselves to accommodate our exchanges. Identity is an ongoing story, one that changes with each telling, one we revise at each way station, each stop, in our *viaje de la vida* (life's journey).¹⁶ Though the words for identity components used by each generation, each Latino group, each individual may be the same, the definitions may be slightly different. Concepts such as self, culture, race, hybridity, *mestizaje*, and spirituality have become more nuanced. We must challenge the present concepts, creating frameworks that span the fissures among us and link us in a series of interconnected webs (*telarañas*).

We must push against any boundaries that have outlived their usefulness. Rigid borders hinder communication and prevent us from extending *beyond* ourselves. While pondering both the necessity and the futility of fences, I paced up and down my side yard looking at my tall new redwood fence. I missed seeing into my neighbor's yard. Though the barrier insures my privacy and lessens noise and intrusion, it limits my visual space.

It's vital that we maintain our heritages' useful, nurturing aspects but release the unproductive and harmful components. When an individual realizes that she doesn't fit into a particular collective-conditioned identity and when the tribe cannot contain all that she is, she must jettison the restrictive cultural components and forge new identities. The point may not be to move beyond a nationalistic search for indigenous roots but rather to undertake transformative work that processes and facilitates evolving as a social group, becoming an extended tribe, and developing a new tribalism. What's important is negotiating alliances among the conflicted forces within the self,

between men and women, among the group's different factions, and among the various groups in this country and the rest of the world. The story of mestizaje must also include other planetary groups. It must cultivate major transformations in spiritual and soul identities.

NOS/OTRAS: BRIDGING SPLITS, LEAPING ACROSS ABYSSES

Estamos peliados

While speaking at various universities, I've witnessed gente in professional disciplines a grito herido (with loud cries) badmouth each other. Palabras picantes like jabañer nasal spray sting the air and, like the slash of whips, scar the skin. Jíjole. For people of color and other outsiders, the academy is a wounding field. Our cuerpos are riddled with emotional scars. Heridas fragment and disrupt the self, disturb who and what we are.

The dialogue between the old male vanguard and Chicanas/Latinas feministas who challenge it has become polarized on many campuses. Hombres y mujeres fear the other for similar reasons: being thought less of, ignored, disliked, displaced, not allowed space. Las feministas chingonas in frustration betray their feminisms; liberated men snarl like machos perrones. Los malentendidos llenos de enemistad fall out, become enemies. De mala gana (with reluctance), we work with each other. Las mujeres somos abusadas por boconas y atrevidas. Women (and cultural others) are still the old standby receptors for projections, still demonized as malinches.

Chicanas silence indigenous women, and indigenous women lambast Chicanas for appropriating Indian identity. We hurt an "other" for their identity, race, gender, sexual preference. Wounded, we let our anger stomp on others as if they're ants. We compete for control. Ignoring the fact that colleagues and academic departments are part of a living ecology (like ants living in the same hill), we often overlook how our words and work affect our colleagues, how they deny our interdependence with the world around us. We disregard the fact that we live in intricate relationship with others, that our very existence depends on our intimate interactions with all life forms. Our shadow aspects reveal themselves in caustic and cutting ways, exposing unfulfilled wishes and repressed feelings. Despite living in close proximity to each other at home, school, and work, despite living in overlapping

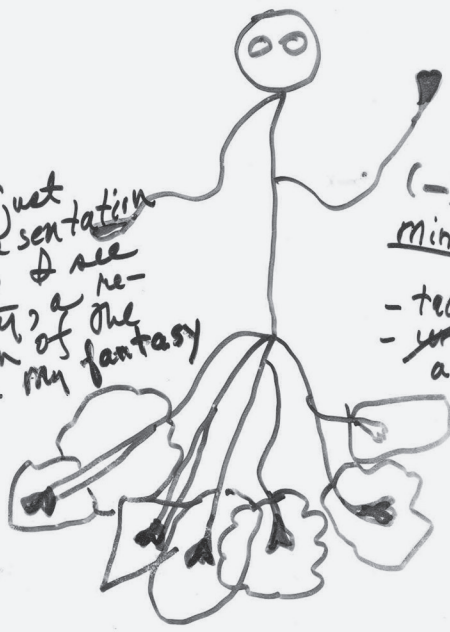
worlds, unconscious forces and unspoken desires divide us. How can we turn this energy exchange from aggression into something else?

Shadow aspects emerge in conflict

Entreguerras (civil wars) arise out of the human effort to define ourselves and our territories when we're up against others who are also determining themselves and their territories but with different and/or opposing ideas, who try to spin and suck us into the remolinos of their ideologies. We may feel threatened by those who possess a different viewpoint or different kinds of knowledge/conocimiento. Fear and ignorance (desconocimientos) of the other—those who come from a different race or class; have a different skin color or gender; dress, speak, or are “abled” differently—may be the source of our problems. Fear and ignorance produce conflict. When things go wrong, you experience discord in your relationship to environment, nature, time, space, and other objects. Exchanges with self, others, and world arouse antagonism when others don't react as you expected. Inner conflict arises from clashing ideas and emotions in your body, mind, soul, and spirit; personal conflicts arise from antagonism with family, friends, and colleagues; extra-personal conflicts occur when you clash against social institutions such as government, church, school, and business. Like a stone thrown in water, conflict ripples outward from inner to personal to extra-personal to environmental to cosmic. Internal wars between parts of the self escalate into wars with others, then into intertribal strife, and into national and international armed conflicts. Stopping the world's violence begins with las entreguerras at home.

To bridge the fissures among us, to connect with each other, to move beyond us/them binaries (men and women, queer and straight, able and disabled), we must dismantle the identity markers that promote divisions. In our conflicts, we must sometimes put certain aspects of our identities backstage; otherwise we'll be so busy asserting and protecting those identities that we'll miss what's really going on, miss the opportunity to become or gain allies. Our defense mechanisms white out the others' voices. When dealing with other women of color, we must rein in our nationalistic tendencies. We try to contemplate others' sufferings from “safe” places without engaging them with deep feeling. However, to really listen, we must put our corazones y razones

model - just a representation of how I see reality, a re-creation of the real. my fantasy



(-) minus

- taken over
- ~~un~~assimilable

(+) Plus

The mestiza

- adjusts to cultural changes
- enters other cultures more readily
- crosses cultural boundaries

= nos / otras

- shift in sense of self / identities
- shift in awareness results in changes in identity

(feeling and intellect) in our manos and extend them to others in empathetic efforts to understand. Intimate listening is more productive than detached self-interest, winning arguments, or sticking to pet theories.

Self/other: The slash in nos/otras

Living in a multicultural society, we cross into each other's worlds all the time. We live in each other's pockets, occupy each other's territories, live in close proximity and intimacy with each other at home, school, and work. We are mutually complicitous—us and them, nosotras y los otros, white and colored, straight and queer, Christian and Jew, self and Other, oppressor and oppressed. We all of us find ourselves in the position of being simultaneously both insider and outsider. The Spanish word “nosotras” means “us.” I see this word with a slash (rajadura) between “nos” (us) and “otros” (others), and use it to theorize my identity narrative of “nos/otras” (see figure 4.3).

La rajadura gives us a third point of view, a perspective from the cracks and a way to reconfigure ourselves as subjects outside binary oppositions, outside existing dominant relations. By disrupting binary oppositions that reinforce relations of subordination and dominance, nos/otras suggests a position of being simultaneously insider/outsider, internal/external exile (see figure 4.4). The clash of cultures is enacted within our psyches, resulting in an uncertain position. An identity born of negotiating the cracks between worlds, nos/otras accommodates contradictory identities and social positions, creating a hybrid consciousness that transcends the us versus them mentality of irreconcilable positions, blurring the boundary between us and others. We are both subject and object, self and other, haves and have-nots, conqueror and conquered, oppressor and oppressed. Proximity and intimacy can close the gap between us and them.

Navigating the cracks between worlds is difficult and painful, like reconstructing a new life, a new identity. Forced to negotiate the cracks between realities, we learn to navigate the switchback roads between assimilation/acquiescence to the dominant culture and isolation/preservation of our ethnic cultural integrity. But both are necessary for survival and growth. When we adapt to cambio (change), we develop a new set of terms to identify with, new definitions of our academic disciplines, and la facultad (the ability) to accommodate

Nos/Otras

Disrupts

- Euroamerican feminist
- dominant racial
- Western concepts of:

discourse

RACE
 IDENTITY
 REALITY
 KNOWLEDGE



disrupts neat categories

mutually exclusive, discontinuous, and inconsistent worlds. As world citizens we learn to move at ease among cultures, countries, and customs. The future belongs to those who cultivate cultural sensitivities to differences and who use these abilities to forge a hybrid consciousness that transcends the “us” versus “them” mentality and will carry us into a *nos/otras* position bridging the extremes of our cultural realities, a subjectivity that doesn’t polarize potential allies.

Today, the division between the majority of “us” and “them” is still intact. We are *nos/otras*. This country does not want to acknowledge its walls—its limits, the places some people are stopped or stop themselves, the lines they’re not allowed to cross. Hopefully, sometime in the future we may become *nosotras* without the slash. Perhaps geography will no longer separate us. We are becoming a geography of hybrid selves of different cities or countries who stand at the threshold of numerous mundos.

As an identity narrative, *nos/otras* has the potential to overturn definitions of otherness. When we examine the *us/them* binary deeply, we find that *otra-ness* may be deceptive, merely a cage we assign to others. According to Buddhism, the primal distinction between self and other is illusory because the existence of self is, itself, an illusion. This distinction is responsible for all evil and sorrow. There is no wrong, no vice, no evil in this world, except what flows from the assertion of entirely independent selfhood. There are no “*otras*”—we all emerge from humanity’s basic shared, communal ground, an emotional-spiritual ground of being. *Nos/otras* (as the slash becomes increasingly permeable) *puede ser el nuevo nombre de seres que escapan de jaulas*.¹⁷ The task of remaking our selves and our cultures is in our own hands; the task of *las nepantleras* is to point the way.

LAS NEPANTLERAS: ALTERNATIVE SENSE OF SELVES

Lugares nepantleras—perspectives from the cracks

While juggling several cultures or forces that clash, *nepantleras* live in tense balances *entremedios*, teetering on edges in states of *entreguerras*. We’re not quite at home here but also not quite at home over there. Like queer and bisexual people who must live in both straight and gay worlds, or like rural people living in cities—stuck between the cracks of home and other cultures—we experience dislocation, disorientation.

We are forced (or we choose) to live in spaces/categories that defy gender, race, class, sexual, geographic, and spiritual locations.

Our uncertain positions as mestizas compel us to negotiate the cracks between worlds, to accommodate contradictory identity positions and mutually exclusive, inconsistent worlds. Las rajaduras give us a nepantla perspective, a view from the cracks, rather than from any single culture or ideology. This perspective from the cracks enables us to reconfigure ourselves as subjects outside the us/them binary. Dwelling in liminalities, in-between states or nepantlas, las nepantleras cannot be forced to stay in one place, locked into one perspective or perception of things or one picture of reality. Las nepantleras refuse to turn right onto the dominant culture's assimilation/acquiescence highway. They refuse to turn left onto the nationalistic-isolationism path demanding that we preserve our ethnic cultural integrity. Instead, las nepantleras construct alternative roads, creating new topographies and geographies of hybrid selves who transcend binaries and de-polarize potential allies. Nepantleras are not constrained by one culture or world but experience multiple realities.

Our perspective's stability relies on liminality and fluidity. Rejecting identification with a single position, we shift from one position to another, listening to all sides. We're no longer locked in the outsider/other/victim place so prevalent in the 1970s and '80s. The nepantla mind-set eliminates polarity thinking where there's no in between, only "either/or"; it reinstates "and." Because our perceptions and thinking contain subtle and hidden biases, we need a nepantla brain to prompt the questioning of our usual assumptions and beliefs.¹⁸ Such a brain would facilitate our ability to look at the world with new eyes. Navigating the cracks is the process of reconstructing life anew, of fashioning new identities. Nepantleras use competing systems of knowledge and rewrite their identities.

La nepantlera, artista-activista, with *consencia de mestiza* offers an alternative self. As intermediaries between various mundos, las nepantleras "speak in tongues"—grasp the thoughts, emotions, languages, and perspectives associated with varying individual and cultural positions. By living on the slash between "us" and "others," las nepantleras cut through isolated selfhood's barbed-wire fence. They trouble the nos/otras division, questioning the subject's privilege, confronting our own personal desconocimientos, and challenging the other's marginal status. Las nepantleras recognize that we're all com-

plicit in the existing power structures, that we must deal with conflictive as well as connectionist relations within and among various groups. Ensuring that our acts not mirror or replicate the oppression and dominant power structures we seek to dismantle, las nepantleras upset our cultures' foundations and disturb the concepts structuring their realities. Las nepantleras nurture psychological, social, and spiritual metamorphosis.

The web of connection

We are all strands of energy connected to each other in the web of existence. Our thoughts, feelings, experiences affect others via this energy web. Our pervasive, excessive sense of woundedness compels us to erect barriers that create knots on the web and block communication. When conflict (like a rock thrown into the web) disrupts a sense of connectedness, las nepantleras call on the “connectionist” or web-making faculty, one of less structured thoughts, less rigid categorizations, and thinner boundaries that allows us to picture—via dreaming and artistic creativity—similarities instead of divisions. Las nepantleras develop esta facultad, a realm of consciousness reached only from an “attached” mode (rather than a distant, separate, unattached, mode), enabling us to weave a kinship entre todas las gentes y cosas. It removes hidden agendas driven by fear or ambition, is not invested in outcomes, and does not favor one view over another. Las nepantleras guard against reproducing exclusions based on racial and class identity. They see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, “see through” our own cultural conditioning and dysfunctional values. As agents of awakening (conocimiento), las nepantleras reveal how our cultures see reality and the world. They model the transitions our cultures will go through, carry visions for our cultures, preparing them for solutions to conflicts and the healing of wounds. Las nepantleras know that each of us is linked with everyone and everything in the universe and fight actively in both the material world and the spiritual realm. Las nepantleras are spiritual activists engaged in the struggle for social, economic, and political justice, while working on spiritual transformations of selfhoods.

Living in nepantla states enables us to create alternative forms of selfhood. Shifting our perception and acquiring a different self, or moving the center of the self slightly, allows us to imagine a different

identity. The imagination's power to shift (what I call *la naguala*) enables *la nepantlera* to flow from one identity or theoretical position to another.¹⁹ When we shift geographical or social positions, another identity may spring into being. Roots grow and ground us in a particular moment or reality if we're available to the emotional currents among those present. In a particular situation you become a person with particular identifiable features; in another situation, you metamorphose into another type with other distinguishing characteristics. Like train way stations, our "self" stops for a few minutes or a few years on *el viaje de la vida*; each way station expands the self or creates another self.²⁰ *Nepantleras* constantly articulate and redefine identity positions to include what has previously been excluded or has not been part of consensual reality. (Identities such as those of neo-Nazis and other hate groups with unethical behavior are not included.)

Green shoots cracking rock

Nepantleras function disruptively. Like tender green shoots growing out of the cracks, they eventually overturn foundations, making conventional definitions of otherness hard to sustain. Their activism, cultural production—indeed, their very lives—challenge traditional identity politics. Dismantling identity entails unlearning stereotypical labels and questioning consensual reality. It means seeing through identity roles and descriptions of reality. Those of us who live skirting *otros mundos*, other groups, in this in-between state I call *nepantla* have a unique perspective. Unlike previous generations of *Raza*, our academic knowledge and language give us both the vocabulary to look at our own cultures and dominant cultures in new ways and the tools to interrogate them. We notice the breaches in feminism, the rifts in *Raza* studies, the breaks in our disciplines, the splits in this country. These cracks show the flaws in our cultures, the faults in our pictures of reality. This perspective from the cracks gives us different ways of defining the self, of defining group identity—as in the lines of a Leonard Cohen song, "There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."²¹ The light spilling through these cracks shows the flaws in our cultures, the faults in our pictures of reality. Like green saplings, new viewpoints push up through the cracks and later grow into trees with roots, dislodging foundations of previous beliefs. Perspectives

from cracks offer us different ways of defining the self, of deciding group identity. Nepantleras both affirm ethnic/national identities and align with wider social movements. Because Raza is realizing more profound mestizajes and wider diasporic changes, our narratives are beginning to construct identities from multiple cracks between worlds. Like older notions of mestizaje, the new versions cast new shadows.

Bridging the extremes of cultural realities, las nepantleras stand at the thresholds of numerous mundos. As world citizens, las nepantleras learn to move at ease among cultures, countries, and customs. The future belongs to those who cultivate cultural sensitivities to others. Recognizing and engaging in the nos/otras imperative (of removing the slash) will take effort by members of all communities cooperating with others. The new tribalism is about being part of but never subsumed by a group, never losing individuality to the group nor losing the group to the individual. The new tribalism is about working together to create new “stories” of identity and culture, to envision diverse futures. It’s about rethinking our narratives of history, ancestry, and even of reality itself.

CHANGING “STORIES” HEALING WOUNDS: THE COYOLXAUHQI IMPERATIVE

Everyone has a song.
God gave us each a song.
That’s how we know who we are.

ROBBIE ROBERTSON, “MAKING A NOISE,” CLASSIC MASTERS, CD

Being “worked” through by remolinos (whirlwinds) de cambio

“Cultura” is the fabric of life that the scissors of previous generations cut, trimmed, embroidered, embellished, and attached to new quilt pieces, but it is a cloth that the wash of time discolors, blends the dyes, and applies new tints. If cultura is the story of group identity (what it means to be Chicano, etc.) and its ideas about what is real, then with alterations in story come nips, tucks, and new wrinkles in both self- and cultural identity. Since cultura is rooted in patterns of the past, its design, trimming, blueprint, and so on laid out and co-created by previous generations, it is a social system that is difficult and slow to change. Cultural ideas (such as what’s honorable or cowardly, manly or

womanly) and their taken-for-granted truisms are imbibed at a young age and become life's givens, a familiarity that makes us feel secure. It can be hard to adopt new ideas and new ways of seeing, especially if these new perspectives seem threatening and make us doubt or distrust our core sense of self. Change generally produces tension because it has no sense of closure, completion, or boundaries. We don't want to risk lo desconocido (the unknown). We want to remain in our cages of custom and habitual thought patterns and behaviors. We resist, dig in our heels when confronted by fast-paced change.

Because we operate in forward mode, we're forced to absorb in ten years or less changes that usually take more than two generations to assimilate. We each have five to one hundred times the amount of sheer human experience of our ancestors just one hundred years ago.²² We live in the constant suck of remolinos—vortexes composed of new ideas, technological shifts, cyber-age information, new class systems, new communities—demanding our attention. Estos remolinos sweep us up and land us in different places, forcing us to shift our values, beliefs, perceptions, and myths. The bits and pieces swirled up and sucked in the cultural vortex create extreme hybridization. We have to process cambio/change more quickly, and our children will have to process even faster. Right now, the who-we-are is undergoing the Coyolxauhqui process of disintegration and reconstruction. Our trabajo is to figure out how an individual maintains her cultural identity in this blurring of borders.

Our habitual perspective changes when something jars us loose, when something traumatic or joyful (like a cambio in jobs or love partners) shocks us out of our habitual state. When we experience bodily and boundary violations, border shifts, and identity confusions, a flash of understanding may sear us, shocking us into a new way of reading the world. Ideological filters fall away; we realize that the walls are porous and we can “see” through our belief system's fictions and fissures. These fissures disrupt the neat categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality.²³ Without the blindfolds, we begin refiguring our identity and life purpose. This change triggers an identity crisis, cracking us open to other ways of identification. Although painful, this shift or shock is the first step in entering the territory of conocimientos/knowledge, insights the prevailing maintainers of the culture's laws would keep from you. Once recognized, these understandings render identity malleable, allowing greater freedom in constructing

identity. Because change often happens in nepantla, we must learn to swim in this liminal space.

Healing sustos and breaches in reality

Breathing the acrid stench of burning rubber, she passes the carcass of a stripped car and the kids playing soccer in a vacant lot carpeted with broken glass. The fetid odor of death wafts from rubble piled high in a bombed-out cavity, brick walls are charred black from fire. She hears a woman's cry coming from the end of the empty alley—la Llorona wailing in the Lower East Side. She stumbles on a piece of cement jutting out of the split sidewalk. Under her feet a crunch, she looks down to shards of broken glass reflecting multiple images of herself like the faces/phases of the moon. Looking up, she sees the full moon, Coyolxauhqui, descending on her, bringing the promise of wholeness.

“SUSTO,” IN LOS ENSUEÑOS DE LA PRIETA

For racialized people, managing losses, the trauma of racism, and other colonial abuses affect our self-conceptions, our very identity, fragmenting our psyches and pitching us into states of nepantla. During or after any trauma (including individual and group racist acts), you lose parts of your soul as an immediate strategy to minimize the pain and to cope—hecho pedazos, you go into a state of susto.²⁴ After a racial or gender wounding, something breaks down; you fall to pieces (you're dismembered). You can't swallow your anger and grief. You struggle to redeem yourself, but you can never live up to the white dominant ideal you've been forced to internalize. Caught in the sticky morass of chaos, unresolved discordance prevents you from pulling yourself together.

When what you expect to happen doesn't happen (getting tenure, curing an illness, and so on), you experience a lack in your life, a loss of control. This breach in reality upsets your sense of equilibrium. A gap (nepantla) or abyss opens up between your desires and what occurred. This disorientation compels you to rethink the situation and the people involved. If you're receptive, you may get an insight that prompts you to revise your sense of things, your vision of reality. With the revised version come new expectations of yourself, others, and the world. When these expectations aren't fulfilled and you can't put your life back on an even keel, can't fill the lack, another breach in reality occurs. Again, you revise the situation and your expectations. The

situation becomes even more tangled when beneath the surface of what you want (or what you think you want), you have unconscious contradictory desires (you want tenure, a better job, yet you dread the responsibilities that the rise in status will demand of you). Personal desires may be entangled with racial or gender conditioning. Conflict arises again. Again you make adjustments. Mourning your wounds and losses is part of processing changes.

Grieving losses

Betrayed for generations, traumatized by racial denigration and exclusion, we are almost buried by grief's heavy pall.²⁵ We never forget our wounds. La Llorona, our dark mother with her perpetual mournful song, has haunted us for five hundred years—our symbol of unresolved grief, an ever present specter in the psyches of Chicanos and Mexicanos. For cultural changes to occur, members of that culture must move through stages similar to those in the grieving process: denial, perceiving the damage, anger, blaming others, bargaining, acceptance, and, finally, establishing a new direction. If you name, acknowledge, mourn, and grieve your losses and violations instead of trying to retain what you've lost through a nostalgic attempt at preservation, you learn not just to survive but to imbue that survival with new meaning. Through activist and creative work you help heal yourself and others.

But often grief is so overwhelming that you can't move on with your life. At those times it's hard to accept loss, hard to recognize that loss is a condition of life. Knowing that permanent stability is impossible, that protective walls and other defenses cannot halt life's flux, is small comfort. Even the fact that all people share life's flux does not allay or offer solace. At such times, you must dig deep into yourself. What nourished you in times of chaos and strife may now save your sanity by connecting you to cultural archetypes, the life force or spirit. I picture these sources, like archetypal cultural figures, welling up from *el cenote*, *el fuente fecundo* or pool in the personal and cultural unconscious formed by the waters of many rivers: the spiritual and the mundane, indigenous Mexican, Chicano, Basque, Spanish, Latino Euro-American, and cultures of color. As the streams flow upward, they co-mingle to create meaning, customs, and practices that spread to and are "borrowed" from and by other cultures through diffusion.

Travel and the flow of information and communication facilitate cultural change and assist in birthing new cultures. As change works itself through your physical body, it also works itself through your culture. You “work” the culture through yourself and you are “worked” through the culture—both personal and cultural identity change accordingly. Together, you write the new cultural story.

After much struggle and in moments of insight/conocimiento, your life and its scattered parts get reconstituted on a different plane: You gain another identity through change and loss. The process of making yourself whole requires all your parts—you can’t define yourself by any single genetic or cultural slice. If one aspect is denied or rejected, if you leave some aspect out of the amalgam, *la masa*, you will not achieve lasting integration (though integration lasts only until something new jars you off kilter). Remember that while Coyolxauhqui in her dismembered state (depicted as a disk with topsy-turvy body parts) embodies fragmentation, she also symbolizes reconstruction in a new order. Her round disk (circle) represents the self’s striving for wholeness and cohesiveness. The Coyolxauhqui process is currently working on each person and her or his culture as both attempt to become more inclusive, more whole. The moon is the Zen emblem of enlightenment.

Con las manos en la masa: Spiritual activism

Our task has always been to heal the personal and group *heridas* of body, mind, spirit. We must repair the damage/*daño* that we have perpetuated on members of our own group, that men have rendered to women and women to men, that adults have done to children, that all groups have done to other groups. I define healing as taking back the scattered energy and soul loss wrought by woundings. Healing means using the life force and strength that comes with *el ánimo* to act positively on one’s own and on others’ behalf. Often a wound provokes an urgent yearning for wholeness and provides the ground to achieve it. In shadow work, the problem is part of the cure—you don’t heal the wound; the wound heals you. First you must recognize and acknowledge *la herida*. Second, you must “intend” to heal. Then you must fall headlong into that wounding—attend to what the body is feeling, be its dismemberment and disintegration. Rupture and psychic fragmentation lead to dialogue with the wound. This dialogue, in turn, opens

imaginings, and images awaken an awareness of something greater than our individual wounds, enabling us to imagine ways of going through nepantla's disorientations to achieve wholeness and interconnect to others on the planet. And finally, you have to plunge your hands into the mess, plunge your hands en la masa, into embodied practical material spiritual political acts. This politics of embodied spiritualities (that I term "conocimiento") es nuestro legado.²⁶ We struggle to decolonize and valorize our worldviews, views that the dominant cultures imagine as other, as based on ignorance. We struggle to cultivate nuestras facultades that rely on inner knowledges.

Back in South Texas, soy la rancherita once more. Though she's been dead for over twenty-five years, I "see" mamagrande Ramona, wounded healer, picking orange leaves, making me un té for my menstrual cramps. Today my sister and I pick cactus, cook los nopalitos—a folk medicine for the diabetes we both struggle with. Across the border, I walk along Avenida Juarez in Nuevo Progreso, Tamaulipas, buying diabetes medications—they're much cheaper in Mexico.—Journal entry²⁷

Congruent with the previous steps, each of us, alone and as a group, goes about doing the inner/outer work of healing, removing and re-writing negative inscriptions. Activism is engaging in healing work. It means putting our hands in the dough and not merely thinking or talking about making tortillas. It means creating spaces and times for healing to happen, espacios y tiempos to nourish the soul. Meditative prayer, a work of the imagination and a powerful generative and transformative force, often accompanies each stage of this healing process. It's frustrating when healing doesn't happen immediately. Some of us choose to slow down the healing work or choose not to heal because we've become familiar and comfortable with our wounds. We may be afraid that our entire life will change if we heal. And it will. Fear holds us back. We fear that the empowerment we may attain if we take on the challenge and succeed will force us to let go of our surroundings, intimates, and situations that disempower us because we don't need them anymore.²⁸

We attempt to heal cultural "sustos" resulting from the trauma of colonial abuses fragmenting our psyches. Pitched into states of nepantla, we step through the gates of change. Fragments and contradictions are stirred en la olla and cooked to a new soup. During this process, the ego/I's will is ousted as the self's sole authority. In the

cauldron the culture unseats its gatekeepers, resolves its fragments and contradictions, and recasts its entire heritage. En la olla the culture reorganizes itself, creating order out of chaos.

Conversaciones to sustain us: Deshaciendo el daño through collective knowledge

We're on a path of recuperation on many fronts, a healing of our humanhood, our selves, our very bodies, and our intellectual lives. Engaged in una búsqueda intelectual, we're combating the concepts, ideas, and ideologies that control us. We're revising and claiming them. This quest has led us to self-development programs, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, self-help books, tapes, therapists, and learning institutions, where we're developing mental/spiritual/emotional healing skills. For the most part, we have been alone, isolated in our journeys. But now we're sharing the stress and the skills by connecting with different people through healing therapies and activism. We must foster mentorship programs. We must facilitate funding for the more experienced organizations to do cross-training, giving technical assistance to less experienced organizations in process-oriented, participatory, and collaborative relationships.

To be in conocimiento with another person or group is to share knowledge, pool resources, meet each other, compare liberation struggles and social movements' histories, share how we confront institutional power, and process and heal wounds. In conocimiento, we seek input from communities so as not to fall into elite collective, isolated cells that widen the chasm between campus politics and grassroots activism. Let's not wait for "Hispanic Week" or "Lesbian and Gay Awareness Week" to try to understand each other's cultures. Solidarity work demands a global, all-embracing vision. Let *nosotras* (without the slash) be el nuevo nombre de mujeres que escapan de jaulas, who struggle with and for differences, who carry differences without succumbing to binaries. How do we survive these wounds and struggles? The path of knowledge requires that we apply what we learn to all our daily activities, to our relationships with ourselves, with others, with the environment, with nature. Escritoras, artistas, scholars, activistas transmit knowledge to help others cope. Through knowledge we liberate ourselves; through knowledge we question the limitations of a single culture/nationalistic identity. Walking el camino de conocimiento

by the light of one's knowledge enables us to close the gaps, bridge the abysses.

Many activists think that spiritual work is not a form of activism but a cop-out; however, this view is too limited and ignores the greater picture. How do those of us laboring in the complex environments of an academy indifferent and even hostile to spirit make our professional work into a form of spiritual practice? By joining intellectual work with spiritual work into a spiritual activism. We must build a practice of contemplation into the daily routines of academic and professional life. Contemplation allows us to process and sort out anger and frustration; it gives us time for the self, time to allow compassion to surface. *La compasión es una conversación sostenida*. In short, we need a spiritual orientation to life. According to Aung San Suu Kyi, "The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit. . . . It is not enough merely to call for freedom, democracy, and human rights. Without a revolution of the spirit, the forces which produced the iniquities of the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration."²⁹

By cultivating awareness, we minimize wounding; by maintaining compassion and empathy for those of different genders, races, classes, regions, generations, and physical and mental capacities, we link to them. To maintain our connections, we must cultivate liberating insights/conocimientos and radical realizations that burst through the cracks of our unconscious and flow up from our cenotes. We need artistic expressions and efforts that heal and inspire, that generate enough energy to make a difference in our lives and in those of others. We must create new art forms that support transformation.

Revivan tallo, rama, raíz/revive flower, stem, branch, root

The Coyolxauhqui imperative urges, "Revivan tallo, rama, y raíz." It tells us that chaos and disintegration will lead to a reorganization, to a new order and a new kind of being in the world. Raza groups are not yet a "we." We are multiple nos/otras. Integrating the fragmented, dislocated pieces/souls of our separate, divided selves must come before integrating all our ethnicities into cohesive geographies of selves.

Maybe what we call ourselves is not ultimately so important. Maybe the dialogue itself is most significant. Until we respect and care for

each other, “nosotras” will mean nothing and socially transforming our selves will fail. To coexist with the other necessitates that we rethink the dichotomy between “us” and “them,” that we redefine “enemy” and “ally.” Isn’t an ally that which empowers you? Isn’t an enemy not another person but the ignorance, fear, hate (los desconocimientos) that diminish us? When our “enemies” become conscious of their desconocimientos and act on that awareness, they may become our “allies.”

We need nepantleras whose strength lies in our ability to mediate and move between identities and positions. Necesitamos nepantleras to inspire us to cross over racial and other borders. To become nepantleras, we must choose to occupy intermediary spaces between worlds, choose to move between worlds like the ancient chamanas who choose to build bridges between worlds, choose to speak from the cracks between the worlds, from las rendijas (rents). We must choose to see through the holes in reality, choose to perceive something from multiple angles. The act of seeing the holes in our cultural conditioning can help us to separate out from overidentifying with personal and cultural identities transmitted by both our own groups and the dominant culture, to shed their toxic values and ways of life. It takes energy and courage, to name our selves and grow beyond cultural and self-imposed boundaries. As agents of awakening, nepantleras remind us of each other’s search for wholeness. Large geographic distances no longer separate us. Because of increasing self-knowledge and interdependence through communication, collaboration, and greater access to information, we’re increasingly becoming a part of the greater whole, but also more individualistic.

The N train crawls through its underground holes, winding in and out of its warrens. On the other side of the glass, the words “7th Ave.” flicker faster and faster, like frames in a movie. La Prieta sways to the subway train’s jarring yet fluid motion. Her hand, along with seven other hands, grips the pole . . . The pole is a tree of life, a new ridge pole, the cosmic tree, not of family but of strangers, and their bodies its branches.

When she is spewed out at the other end an hour later, she feels the City pulsating like a live animal. The buildings are watchful trees rooted deep in the bowels of the Earth. Where before she felt drained and exhausted by the energy of thousands of packed people, where before she tired herself out trying to protect herself from the intensity, anger, frustration, and madness

of a million busy souls sardined in the trains, buses, streets, now she rides on that energy.—“Susto,” in Los ensueños de la Prieta

Today we (all people, not just Raza) are poised on the brink of a great flowering of our árbol de la vida de “amar la plenitude del árbol,” a geography of a new tribalism not foreclosed by traditional categories. For this, our moment in history, we need to spread our branches and increase our capacity for awareness, vision, presence, and compassion. In Gandhi’s words, “You have to be the change you want to see in this world.” In seeking the truths of our lives, let’s not draw back from what frightens us. Let’s look toward our nepantleras (poetas, artistas, queer, youth, and differently abled) who have a tolerance for ambiguity and difference, la facultad to maintain numerous conflicting positions and affinity with those unlike themselves. Let’s call on las ánimas de nuestros abuelas y abuelos y pedir a diosita que nos de rumbo y destino para seguir el camino de conocimiento.

I take my daily “pilgrimage” to the Guadalupe tree, make la promesa (vow) to write well. When the tree’s spirit answers my prayer, I offer it un milagrito, a tiny pluma (pen), gently placed in its hollowed trunk. I look up through the branches and see the moon. El árbol de nuestras vidas has weathered a lot of storms—some branches torn off, trunk gashed, roots severed. Yet still its lifeblood rises, still it faces the storms of life with grace. Ahora sí chispas, quémonos / Now is the time. Echéle ganas Raza, agarremos ánimo—sí se puede.