

BOOK REVIEW

Shapeshifting Subjects: Gloria Anzaldúa's Naguala and Border Arte

Kelli D. Zaytoun. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2022, 198 pages (ISBN: 978-0252086511)

Gloria González-López

Department of Sociology, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA,
Email: gloria@austin.utexas.edu

(Received 11 April 2024; accepted 22 April 2024)

Beautifully written, accessible, and informative, *Shapeshifting Subjects* invites readers to continue expanding their understanding of Gloria E. Anzaldúa's influential contributions especially revolving around a key, inspirational concept, and paradigm: la naguala—the shapeshifter. With no doubt, this informative book shows the hard and meticulous work of a detail-oriented feminist archeologist of the priceless Anzaldúan archive of knowledge, especially revealing unpublished writings. The book opens with an inviting Introduction, followed by four intellectually stimulating chapters, each one with well-organized interconnected sections following an engaging sequence, and closing with a moving, personal Conclusion. Reading it was a special journey, it was as if the serpent of the nepantlera spirit was turning page after page for me, the avid reader chasing knowledge with immense curiosity.

The first chapter invites readers to learn in depth about la naguala. La naguala (feminine of “nagual,” that I have seen spelled also as “nahual,” “nawal,” and “nahualli”) is a concept that has received special attention by anthropologists and historians studying Mesoamerican societies and cultures. For Anzaldúa, as Zaytoun explains, la naguala is “a theory and practice and presents an account of subjectivity that deconstructs the traditional Western dualisms of mind/body, matter/non-matter, matter/spirit, and self/other” (p. 9). La naguala is a concept with multiple fluid, and shifting interconnected meanings, and intellectual trajectories flowing through four sections in this chapter, exploring specific dimensions. First, the path of the naguala in Anzaldúa's work unpacks the evolution of la naguala as an idea and a paradigm, one that receives more attention in a later stage of Anzaldúa's life journey. As a powerful practice of consciousness, la naguala, is a key force in *conocimiento*, a powerful process of inner transformation and evolution that Anzaldúa explained in detailed in her inspirational “now let us shift” article. The second section invites readers to look closely at a meticulous examination of la naguala in conversation with academic feminism with Latina/x feminist phenomenology, posthumanism, new materialisms, Indigenous studies, and Native

feminist theories. The third section offers a generous analysis of la naguala and Indigenous metaphysics and practice. At the root of la naguala is nagualismo, a form of Mesoamerican shamanism that exists to this day. She engaged intellectually with academic and non-academic authors (including controversial as well as highly respected), in her shamanic journeys rooted in Mesoamerican philosophies. And the fourth section looks closely at la naguala as a subjective practice, highlighting its nature as that special consciousness with a purpose; la naguala shifts from the “ego” to a dimension that is more interconnected with the context, with the exterior world, and then to openness: the ultimate nepantla. Anzaldúa had a name for those of us who embrace this process: las nepantleras.

The second chapter offers Zayoutn’s respectful and honest conversations with Anzaldúa’s critics and expands on their different critiques to unpack her engagement with Nahua mythology and metaphysics and expose their decolonizing potential. This chapter has four sections, all interconnected and examining specific topics. The first section offers detailed and insightful reflections on shamanism and how bodies of knowledge have unpacked across disciplines, Western academia, and the multilayered connection that Anzaldúa had with it, personally and intellectually, and the complex areas in between. The discussion about recent scholarship by PJ DiPietro (2020) who engages with Anzaldúa’s nagualismo, a “shamanic practice of transformation” (p. 48), while examining the decolonization of transgender bodies is intellectually stimulating. The second section engages with the arguments presented by their critics, selectively validating them and expanding on the different concerns; this section offers reflections that may help understand these tensions and opportunities to expand our understanding of Anzaldúa’s scholarship, chronologically, pre-, and post- her now classic book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The third section offers informative reflections on border arte as a project with the potential to decolonize not only the artists who are actively creating it in the in-between spaces—nepantla—but also the communities where border artists breathe, engage with life, and reinvent themselves while producing their creative work. This chapter closes with the last section on how and why la naguala has been present all along—in different forms, expressions, symbols—throughout Anzaldúa’s intellectual journey, from *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) to *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* (2015). Creativity is at the core of personal and social transformation, as well as healing, and the snake—la víbora—is la naguala. “La naguala, as a practice of consciousness, selfhood and subjectivity, initiates that journey,” asserts Zayoutn (p. 63).

The third chapter highlights the presence of Arab American and Arab Canadian feminists in conversation with Anzaldúa. The incorporation of inspirational feminists who have family roots in the Middle East offers the culturally rich and moving contributions of a social group based in the West that has actively resisted Western and monolithic constructions of knowledge, subjects, and women’s lives. The chapter offers three engaging, interconnected sections that center Arab American women’s literary scholarship, the theme of nagualan consciousness in their moving publications, and post-oppositional consciousness. The first section situates Arab American women’s literary contribution within a larger lineage of scholarship that has flourished in the United States, despite of and as a way to resist painful expressions of anti-Arab discrimination and Islamophobia, working hard to de-essentialize what it means to be both American and Arab, especially after September 11, 2001. The second section offers enlightening reflections about the presence of the grandmother in the moving texts by Kadi (Arab and Canadian), Saliba (Lebanese American), and Anzaldúa who revisit

the life stories of their grandmothers. Food is also relevant in this subjective journey as authors engage with family stories that invite readers to recall the delicious flavor of memories and the imagination, either in *The Language of Baklava* by Jordanian American Abu-Jaber or *Nopalitos*, Anzaldúa's bilingual poem. The body reacts to the taste of our memories, while rituals, traditions, and family stories with emotionally meaningful words and concepts, in Arabic or Spanish, flow through the engaging writings, all while the nagualan consciousness caresses the heart. And lastly, the third section engages in special ways with Keating's *Transformation Now!* The powerful book encourages us to let go of oppositional thinking, a process that will help us nurture our "alliances and communities." Regardless of the borderlands where we happen to be experiencing life, three lessons are vital in the process of Keating's "radical visions for transformation," namely: "making connections through differences, positing radical interrelatedness, and listening with raw openness" (p. 85).

And finally, chapter four takes readers back to the wound, the rupture where pain meets the sacred, the rupture where both healing and transformation take place. The trauma of coloniality is acknowledged as relevant in Anzaldúa's scholarship, the colonial wound is the locus of her creativity, from the early to the last stages of her prolific life as a writer. Three sections give life to this last inspirational chapter, addressing themes such as writing from the wounds to refashion the cosmos, the presence of la víbora—the serpent/snake—in Anzaldúa's life and work, and writing from the wounds and decoloniality. "Narrative and writer move and change together, manifesting the self-generating force of teotl and refashioning the cosmos," best captures the spirit of the first section (p. 100). Teotl is the energy in motion, the "self-generating life force or energy" (p. 169). Shapeshifting is at the core of transformation as a process; writing and engaging in artistic activities are part of the transfiguration of teotl. Writing as a shamanic process is beautifully discussed in this section, and Zaytoun (p. 103–104) includes one of my favorite Anzaldúa's quotes on trauma:

Wounds cause you to shift consciousness—they either open you to the greater reality normally blocked by your habitual point of view or else shut you down... Like love, pain might trigger compassion—if you are tender with yourself, you can be tender to others" ("now let us shift" 571–572).

Nagualan consciousness moves through wounds but getting stuck or "excessive dwelling on wounds" creates conditions for desconocimiento to emerge (p. 105).

La víbora sneaks in to give life to the second section. The snake, explains Zaytoun, is described in more detail as a naguala in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*. La víbora has had different meanings, metaphorically shedding its skin, moving slowly, gently, at times in a positive way, at times as dangerous, and at times in between. Regardless, the snake is part of the process of creativity.

And finally, the last section of the last chapter and the conclusion of the book symbolically join hands to embrace the spirit of this inspirational publication. The ultimate aspiration is to write from our wounds to uproot decoloniality: decolonize our imagination, our cognition, our heart, our story, our writing, and all of it *through* our writing. Writing, writing, writing, writing from the wound; writing is border arte and a shamanic journey. Writing to resist coloniality *and* to heal from coloniality. Writing to change my self, myself, our selves, ourselves, with the ultimate aspiration that the personal yet collective journey of human intimacy, our subjectivity will change our world.

Reading *Shapeshifting Subjects* in anticipation of the 2024 total solar eclipse in Austin (located along that pathway crossing Mexico, the United States, and Canada on a historic day) and finishing this review the day after the magnificent event, made it a special shamanic experience. This special book, however, carries its own cosmic force, beyond any contemporary celestial affairs. Thank you again and again, Gloria E. Anzaldúa for being that intellectual healer, *la curandera intelectual* for many of us feminists, for the transformational power of your presence and writing, and for what had remained unpublished yet to be learned. And thank you, Kelli D. Zaytoun for immersing yourself in the Anzaldúa archives—published and unpublished—and for embracing the spirit that flows through them, to invite us to continue unpacking and analyzing told and untold stories of trauma, for connecting us across cultures, for encouraging us to rupture to repair, to open up to heal, to keep writing to erase the pain, to continue transforming our inner worlds in deep connection with our external worlds, and the difficult to describe space and process in-between. May I be able to decolonize myself through this life changing, never ending, and shapeshifting journey—always in community.

Gloria González-López is a feminist, public sociologist, educator, and award-winning author. She holds the C.B. Smith Sr. Centennial Chair #1 in US-Mexico Relations and is a Professor of Sociology at The University of Texas at Austin. She is a consultant for feminist professionals working in sexual violence eradication, prevention, and treatment programs at grassroots organizations and academic institutions in Mexico. Because of the kindness and generosity of students, colleagues, mentors, and supervisors, she received the 2021 *Simon-Gagnon Lifetime Achievement Award* and the 2022 *Feminist Scholar-Activist Award*, both from the American Sociological Association, Sexualities Section and Sex & Gender Section, respectively.