

Review / Reseña

Keating, AnaLouise. *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2022. 334 pp.

Francisco E. Robles

University of Notre Dame

In her latest book, AnaLouise Keating takes up significant material from Gloria Anzaldúa's enormous archive at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas, painting an intimate scholarly portrait of arguably the most influential philosopher, writer, intellectual collaborator, and editor in U.S. Latinx Studies. Given how important Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* has been since its publication in 1987—especially in Chicana Studies, Borderlands Studies, Queer Theory, Gender Studies, and Religious Studies—Keating's *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook* does an excellent job of providing a digestible yet appropriately complex overview of the eminent author's enormous published and archival writings. Focusing primarily on Anzaldúa's creative processes (in terms of writing, thinking, taking notes, developing talks and projects, and more), Keating's text is a portrait of the *artista* at work.

To achieve this masterful synthesis of materials, Keating creates an engaging discussion (quite literally, given her use of italics within parentheticals to offer meta-commentary) of how the singular Anzaldúa's creative process and theoretical insights developed within the academy, adjacent to it, and well beyond its walls. Keating,

academia's leading Anzaldúa scholar, has already brought us *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro*, the much-acclaimed edited manuscript of Anzaldúa's doctoral dissertation. With a well-managed breadth of coverage, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook* matches the depth of *Light in the Dark* and constitutes another significant contribution. Keating overlays published work and archival materials that reveal Anzaldúa's scholarly process (especially early drafts, notes, outlines, and various artifacts of intellectual endeavor), explaining the relationships between texts, concepts, moments in Anzaldúa's life, conversations she had with fellow scholars, exercises in self-discovery, her spiritual practices, and her vibrant intellectual curiosity. Most important, for Keating, is how everything that makes up Anzaldúa's scholarly process is intimately connected to and emerges from the act of writing. Throughout *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, Keating emphasizes the arduous writing process Anzaldúa undertook, variously observing that "Writing was her obsession, her passion, her nemesis, her joy, as well as the source of her livelihood" (47), that "Anzaldúa's revisions were meticulous, time-consuming, and multifaceted" (61), and that "her process was torturous, tedious, and at times toxic" (62). Keating is simultaneously in awe of Anzaldúa's writing process, wary of the enormous toll it took on Anzaldúa herself, and acutely aware of the patience it took to work with her. However, because of the enormous care Anzaldúa took, especially in casting her ideas within highly specific contexts and settings, Keating notes that "Like her dialogic writing process, Anzaldúa's approach to theory-making is deeply relational and, thus, radically inclusive" (65).

"Dialogic," "inclusive," and "relational" are all concepts noted in *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, and these key terms situate Keating's own approach to Anzaldúa's vast published and unpublished archive. These are terms currently in wide use, and they shed light on how Anzaldúa's oeuvre continues to speak to scholars. Other descriptive terms Keating turns to, such as "generative" and "imaginal," are a bit more unique in their usage. For example, Keating's use of "generative" is closer to José Esteban Muñoz's idea of queer futurity than anything else (and is far better than terms such as "productive" or "useful"). Something that is "generative," for Keating, is expansive and multifaceted, in the sense that it describes how Anzaldúa links to mythical concepts from Nahua epistemology and spirituality, as well as to material theories of coalition and lesbian feminism. Two other terms, one unique to Keating and the other used in a unique way by Keating, are "post-oppositional" and "oracular research." Since I will discuss the "post-positional" later—especially given how important it is to Keating's broader Anzaldúan intellectual project—I will briefly refer

here to “oracular research,” a descriptive phrase Keating uses to give a sense of Anzaldúa's wide range of inspirational spiritual practices. Anyone familiar with Anzaldúa's work knows that she utilized the Tarot and the Zodiac system frequently to test her ideas, guide her creative process, and relate to others within her circles. For Keating, “oracular research” additionally names Anzaldúa's use of the I Ching, meditative practices influenced by yoga and Roman Catholic prayer, Sabian symbology, Nahua mythology, and other spiritual and mystical traditions. Keating describes “oracular research” as the start of “idea generation” which, for Anzaldúa, “occurred through self-reflective dialogues with inner and outer worlds initiated through a wide variety of activities: meditation, freewrites, walking, dreaming, visualization, imaginal journeys, reading, time in nature, metaphysical technologies, freewrites (*Look! I wrote freewrites twice: they were that important to Anzaldúa's process, as her journals and writing notes attest*), and more” (55, italics original). Keating writes that “Anzaldúa employed a wide range of metaphysical, scientific technologies from western, eastern, and Indigenous wisdom traditions,” which gave her a sense of being “connected more closely with the larger cosmic force animating herself and all existence. Importantly, this larger force both is and is not Anzaldúa herself: it's neither a wholly external diving force, nor synonymous with her inner intuitive nature. Rather, it is all this and more” (55).

Anzaldúa's spiritual practices are perhaps the most puzzling part of her legacy (along with her fairly sanguine adoption of José Vasconcelos's concept of *la raza cósmica*, and in particular her incomplete transformation of his eugenicist-inflected theory of *mestizaje*) for two reasons: first, they do not fit neatly into the rationalist intellectual tradition that universities and colleges purport to represent; and second (and most importantly), they show how Anzaldúa's spiritual practices were often appropriative at best, and at worst, reductive and roughshod. For critics of Anzaldúa in particular, her use of Nahua (particularly, Aztec) mythology to inform her spiritual practices indicates an incomplete epistemological framework based on residual Chicana/o nationalism rather than a careful analysis and thorough research into Indigenous lifeways and spirituality. Yet, as Domino Renee Pérez has noted, this critique has often been “lodged against Anzaldúa, who expressed the same concern about how her work might be read” (495). This is part of Anzaldúa's complicated legacy, one that, Pérez notes, can be learned from while being pushed against when we “define with specificity who we are and where we come from. We need to acknowledge the effects of internalized colonialism that simultaneous[ly] classed and racialized a nation of detribalized mixed-bloods and mestizos. We need to examine the ways that Chicano ideology historically

has privileged particular kinds of Indigenous bodies and Indigeneity over others” (Pérez 499).

One of the hesitations I have about this book, as I do with some of Keating’s other discussions of Anzaldúa (even as they are nearly always remarkably insightful and clarifying), is the decisive outlook she offers. Even as she frames her definitional work as “more invitational than exhaustive”—which it is, and Keating’s use of this term is exactly right—the text runs the risk of encapsulating rather than activating Anzaldúa’s theoretical contributions (78). By way of counterpoint, Keating’s *Transformation Now! Toward a Post-Operational Theory of Change* activates (primarily) Anzaldúa’s work to outline a genuinely transformational praxis of scholarly and creative engagement. Some terms in *Transformation Now!*—such as “post-operational,” as well as the idiosyncratic and wonderful uses of “transformative” and “generative” that Keating elaborates—appear in *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*. “Post-operational” in particular is a term that could, if ventured forth even more regularly, provide excellent context for the ways that Anzaldúa’s theories of contradiction decisively disrupt western epistemology’s assumptions of non-contradiction at the heart of philosophical inquiry. Anzaldúa’s work is not straightforwardly dialectical (especially in the post-Marxian and neo-Hegelian sense). It is also not in the business of arguing for the fundamental non-contradiction of antinomies (as in Kant’s use of practical reason to reveal the limits of pure reason), and it only superficially resembles the processes of deconstruction engaged in by Lyotard and Derrida, in particular. What Anzaldúa has always offered, instead of these, is a robust theory of contradiction, which in *Borderlands/La Frontera* is described as “abiding” within the difficult, soul-wrenching Coatlicue state as part of the process of self-discovery.

This is not to say that Keating is wrong; rather it is to say, as with many other archivists and archivally-based scholars, that Keating’s careful work often suggests that it contains the first and last word of interpretation. In a sense, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook* suggests to scholars a way to build on Anzaldúa’s work, and to do it correctly. Partially as a response to resonant critiques of Anzaldúa from scholars engaged in Indigenous Studies and Black Studies, particularly Afrolatinx Studies, Keating’s work offers lengthy, sustained engagement with the *process* of Anzaldúa’s process (so to speak), thus explaining the deep particularities of Anzaldúa’s work. The book would have benefitted by engaging more directly with some of Anzaldúa’s recent critics, such as Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2001, 2003, 2016), Nicole Guidotti-Hernández (2011), and Madelaine Cahuas (2019). Even including some of these works that were

specifically critical of *Borderlands/La Frontera* in the “References” at the end of the book, whether within the “Secondary Sources” section or in their own section, would be helpful. Indeed, the marginality of these critical perspectives is even more emphatic given that only in two footnotes does Keating make the following observations: “The interview, eventually titled ‘Speaking across the Divides,’ was initiated by her good friend Inés Hernández-Ávila [and included Domino Renee Pérez]. At the time, I thought Anzaldúa was taking on too much and further jeopardizing her health; however, given her premature death, we’re fortunate that she had this opportunity to reflect on Indigeneity and directly address critiques made of her work” (314, fn. 49); and, adding to her argument that Anzaldúa used the term *mestiza* “to underscore her complex racial/ethnic/cultural heritage while foregrounding the Indigenous component—an ancestral connection that was generally ignored (or disparaged) among Mexican Americans during her childhood” (174), Keating succinctly notes that “This point gets lost in critiques of Anzaldúa’s references to Indigeneity” (316, fn. 15).

As it stands, the uneasy silence between Anzaldúa’s champions and detractors persists in Latinx Studies. Given Anzaldúa’s foundational status within Latinx Studies as a critical Chicana feminist voice—one that shifted the parameters of Chicano Studies quite radically and provided the borderlands concept as an enduring spatial and metaphorical heuristic—it is important to enliven her legacy by seriously acknowledging and expanding critiques of her body of work. Keating does not offer apologies; rather, she engages in a roundabout apologetics, showing that Anzaldúa’s meticulous writing process produced theoretical and creative insights based primarily in transformative care for others, as well as important insights into the development of Anzaldúa’s embodied philosophy, which is distinct from philosophical phenomenology. Emphasizing care and relationality, for Keating, offers an oblique response to Anzaldúa’s critics, a (non-)argumentative strategy that stands out.

Yet this refusal to engage has a positive side: the heightened and thorough development of Keating’s generative engagement with Anzaldúa’s intellectual process. Especially in Part I, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook* reads like a sustained introduction to an archival guide, and Part III could best be described as an annotated finding aid. Or, perhaps, Parts I and III, and certain portions of Part II, could form a meticulous set of notes for a future intellectual biography of Anzaldúa. Indeed, considering her rigorous, careful work with materials here and *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro*, Keating’s Anzaldúa biography would be exceptional, especially if Part I were to form its basis. The careful explanatory position of Part I is sustained through Part II and the

very beginning of Part III. Keating provides exceptionally robust contexts for eighteen key theoretical concepts developed by Anzaldúa: autohistoria and autohistoria-teoría, borderlands, el cenote, the Coatlicue state, conocimiento, the Coyolxauhqui process, desconocimiento, la facultad, geographies of selves, El Mundo Zurdo, la naguala, nepantla, nepantleras, new mestiza, new mestiza consciousness, new tribalism, nos/otras, and spiritual activism. Some of these might seem closely related (the Coatlicue state, conocimiento, Coyolxauhqui process, desconocimiento, nepantla, and new mestiza consciousness, for example), but the care Keating takes to make fine distinctions is exactly right, given Anzaldúa's own very careful processes of distinction and gradation. If this book had consisted solely of Part II, that would be enough, because Keating's unparalleled archival work provides clarifying and compelling insights into Anzaldúa's philosophy and literary theory, forming a sort of one-person "Keywords" volume somewhat in the style of the NYU Press Keywords Series. Each of the entries is easily navigable on its own, yet all of them are thematically and conceptually intertwined, such that Anzaldúa's theoretical body of work, more broadly, comes into focus. Although at first glance it seems as if the precision with which Keating defines the eighteen terms in Part II might be a way of responding to past and future critiques of Anzaldúa's work, I firmly believe the thoroughness shown here is more about honoring the important differences and developments of Anzaldúa's thought in and beyond its contexts. This is to the enormous benefit of Anzaldúa as an eminent philosopher of contradiction whose work should always be considered in motion and in process, rather than definitively—and definitionally—stable.

Especially if paired with key texts of Anzaldúa's, the eighteen entries in Part II provide excellent pedagogical material. For undergraduates, one or more entries would offer excellent explanatory material that can be built upon when conducting discussions or examining Anzaldúa's published work. The entries are also exemplary pieces of scholarly engagement, especially in terms of highlighting the process of analyzing texts, defining terms, and providing thick description. For graduate students, Keating's entries and definitions offer ample opportunities for clarification, dialogue, and dispute, whether in seminar settings or as structured writing assignments. In addition, the "Future Directions" and "Related Theories" sections of each entry provide questions that can be taken up in a seminar, an office hours meeting, or even seminar papers, conference papers, and long-form writing such as masters' theses or dissertation chapters. For scholars looking to engage with Anzaldúa beyond *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the questions Keating asks could provoke future research, offer insight into current

work, or even prompt robust critical engagements with Anzaldúa's thought (whether positive or negative). No doubt Keating has these critiques in mind at many points, as *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook* provides the deep history of the thinking that underlies all of Anzaldúa's work. The invitation, then, is to engage as carefully with Anzaldúa as Anzaldúa did with herself and others.

Even as I have outlined some hesitations about Keating's refusal to engage thoroughly with Anzaldúa's critics, especially given important debates about race and indigeneity that are currently reshaping Latinx and Latin American Studies, I believe, pertinently enough, that her otherwise excellent and altogether thorough work in *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook* will lead to these necessary discussions. Anzaldúa's scholarly legacy is complex, and for that reason, it is worth renewed engagement and reassessment. Recent work in Desert Studies (particularly by the geographers Andrew Curley and Natalie Koch) offers complications to the borderlands paradigm at the heart of U.S.-based Latinx Studies, especially as this work intersects with the ecological turn in Latinx Studies (represented very visibly in the award-winning critical anthology *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial*, edited by Sarah D. Wald, David J. Vazquez, Priscilla Solis Ybarra, and Sarah Jaquette Ray). As Keating notes in several places, Anzaldúa's contributions to queer theory have not been fully acknowledged, as she has mostly been celebrated for what and who she represents, rather than for the particularly prescient insights into coalitional theory that are grounded in queer activism (these coalitional tendencies have been noted especially by Karma R. Chávez). I am grateful that AnaLouise Keating maintains her rigorous and expansive contributions to the legacy of Gloria Anzaldúa. *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook* is eminently readable and is full of Keating's expert commentary, and for that reason, it is an ideal text for teaching students at every level, including those of us who need reminders of how Anzaldúa's legacy reverberates beyond the formative work she did in the 1980s.

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