Moderator Commentary
Not Just Surviving but Fully Relishing the Borderlands, Defiantly and Triumphant

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Abstract: Anzaldúa emphasized, and presenters on the panel confirm, that true revolution and social transformation can only take place when we are willing to imagine paradigms that disrupt the rigidity of either/or constructions. The notion of “borderlands” is, of course, central to such a disruption. When I first encountered Anzaldúa’s poem “To live in the Borderlands means you,” I felt I was returning to one of my earliest memories, a story I had heard often in my childhood and youth. Anzaldúa concludes her poem with the words “To survive the Borderlands, / you must live sin fronteras / be a crossroads.” I appreciate her urging the reader to dwell in the crossroads, to refuse to be placed within any one camp, to resist being categorized and labeled, but I am puzzled by Anzaldúa’s use of the word “survive.” That word suggests that there is something unpleasant about the borderlands; that it is a place in which one would rather not be if one were not forced to remain in it. To see the borderlands as an unwelcome place is to capitulate to the dominant paradigm that demands that we choose which side we’re on, that sees as weakness the need to recognize value in diverse, even conflicting, perspectives. So, I say to Anzaldúa, I choose not just to survive the borderlands, but to relish it. I proudly persist in it defiantly and triumphantly. There is power in the borderlands, potency in the middle spaces. Let us not minimize the great energy of the in-between.

The four papers in this panel on the spiritual dimensions of social transformation as they relate to Gloria Anzaldúa’s work all draw on her refusal to be locked into a dualistic mode of thinking. Anzaldúa emphasized, and these presenters confirm, that true revolution and social transformation can only take place when we are willing to imagine paradigms that disrupt the rigidity of either/or constructions. The notion of “borderlands” is, of course, central to such a disruption.

Michelle Corbin rejects the divide between spirituality and rationality by turning to Anzaldúa’s call for a “spiritual activism.” Spirituality need not connote a preoccupation with individual inward states; rather, immersing oneself in spiritual self-regeneration demands a commitment to improving the world for all of one’s fellow human beings, argues Corbin. Sharon Kim offers us a portrait of the “hybrid spiritual-
That word suggests that there is something unpleasant about the borderlands; that it is a place in which one would rather not be if one were not forced to remain in it. To see the borderlands as an unwelcome place is to capitulate to the dominant paradigm that demands that we choose which side we’re on, that sees as weakness the need to recognize value in diverse, even conflicting, perspectives. So, I say to Anzaldúa, I choose not just to survive the borderlands, but to relish it. I proudly persist in it defiantly and triumphantly. There is power in the borderlands, potency in the middle spaces. Let us not minimize the great energy of the in-between.

I end with the mythological story that Anzaldúa’s poem reminded me of from my childhood. This story has only recently revealed its great power to me, so I treasure it as a newly discovered gift. I’ve written about it in my book *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (2004), and it is from there that I excerpt it:

A certain demon wanted unlimited powers and so decided to pray long and hard to God. The sincerity of his worship so impressed God that He decided to grant the demon any wish that he desired. The demon asked for immortality, but God told him that immortality was reserved only for the divine and could not be granted to a human. Believing himself to be shrewd and capable of outsmarting God, the demon then rephrased his request as a set of conditions, thinking that by so doing he had anticipated and rendered void all the circumstances under which he could conceivably lose his life. “I wish to die neither on earth nor on heaven, neither indoors nor outdoors, neither in daylight nor in darkness, and to meet my death neither at the hands...
of man nor beast.” God granted the
demon his wish. Complacent in his
supposed immortality, the demon
renewed with increased vigor his
campaign of terror and killing,
bringing destruction upon those
around him. One day, when he was
warned by his God-fearing son
that he would invite the wrath of
God upon himself, the demon dis-
missed the power of God and
flaunted the protection offered by
the wish that he had been granted.
It was the hour of twilight, and at
that instant, there emerged from
the pillar in his palace, a creature
that was half-human, half-lion,
who proceeded to lift the demon
and carry him to the threshold of
his home. There, between the in-
doors and outdoors, in the twilight
(neither daylight nor darkness),
the creature who was neither whol-
ly human nor wholly beast lifted
the demon off the ground and,
holding him in the air (so that he
was neither on earth nor in the
heavens), tore the life out of him.

(19)

This story illustrates to perfection the
dangers of a dualistic mode of thinking.
The demon believed that he had envisioned
all possible scenarios because his imagina-
tion could not conceive the vast space be-
tween two opposite ends, between two po-
larities. His small mind “effectively put the
chains on his imagination and led him to
delineate a restricted reality based on the
limited constructs of his consciousness”
(19). Unlike the demon, the four presenters
on this panel break the chains of a para-
digm of dualities and show us the land-
scape of unlimited possibilities.