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# MEMORY OF THE FLESH: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON WORD AND FLESH

And the Word became Flesh and lived among us,
And we have seen its glory.—John 1:13

To reflect theologically about the body is to be thrown into a zone of great ambivalence. On the one hand, Christian theology rightly claims to be a theology of incarnation in which a human body is placed at the center of salvation. John's statement "the Word became Flesh" is paradigmatic of hopes of incarnation. But have we seen its glory, the glory of the flesh? While celebrating the desire of God to take flesh, the statement's cosmology seems to advocate precisely the opposite: from the flesh toward a disembodied universality invariably represented in male terms. For the aim of the divine Logos is most often interpreted as the rescue of men from the particularity of the flesh and the offer of a birth "not of blood or of the will of flesh or the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). Thus, Jesus's role is defined as one of bringing back, of rescuing creation from its creatureliness—from the original water, blood, and flesh. If Logos was born in the flesh, it is assumed, it was to erase once and for all a more pervasive origin of the whole humanity in the womb: "It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless" (John 6:63).

This depiction, however, hardly exhausts Christian attitudes toward the body. From its early days Christianity declared as heretical all attempts to separate word from flesh. Yet the flesh-denying interpretations of the Christian message continue to influence theology—as well as the popular

reactions against it. The enormous success of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which represents Christianity as pathologically revolting against the flesh to the point of conspiring to hide aspects of Jesus's life, demonstrates how compelling such a characterization still is and how scandalous Jesus's sexuality can be. In our popular imaginary as in our theologies, word and flesh are still in conflict.

The Christian ambivalence toward the body only intensifies when we attempt to reflect theologically on the no less conflictive "Latina" body. I confess to have been paralyzed by the audacity (or naiveté?) of such an endeavor. This was not because such a signifier is unheard of; indeed, our culture is overpopulated by images that purport to represent Latina bodies. My hesitation derives from the ambiguous status of bodies as both flesh and image. Bodies are concrete and irreducible persons, but they are also elusive signifiers as key pieces in the social battles for authorization and value. And we are caught in those battles. Because we are simultaneously spectators and characters in these social performances, the effort to think critically about bodies and of ourselves as bodies induces a kind of disorienting double vision. On the one hand the representations of "our" bodies—these signs (and their logos)—are often alien, and yet they are so powerful that they seem simply to replace our bodies. The image becomes the body.[1] And yet the most threatening aspect of these cultural representations is that those images are never merely outside ourselves. Our bodies are signs within semiotic systems, and inasmuch as they affect how others react to us (how they "read" our bodies) we are also shaped by those images. Whether we find these representations repulsive or alluring—as we combat them, or mimic them, or both—we are affected by them. Thus the boundaries between bodies and representations, between word and flesh, are revealed as unstable and elusive.

Representations of bodies have been at the center of the social imaginaries that have historically justified the subordination of women, people of color, and especially women of color. Indeed, subordinated bodies are frequently imagined as wholly flesh. As we attempt to break loose of the grip of these cultural constructions, to distance ourselves from the images that supplant us in ongoing social performances, it might be tempting to seek another birth: a birth not of blood or of flesh, or the will of man, or of woman. We might be seduced by the illusion of overcoming the flesh and to create ourselves—just like the God of many dominant Christian traditions—out of nothing.

However, to write about black and Latina bodies theologically is precisely to refuse to accept the deception of a birth that disavows blood and

flesh. But to turn our attention to our bodies—to ourselves as bodies—is hardly to escape the realm of representation. After all, I am writing—and writing in the hope that my words might contribute to the overcoming of oppression—in the flesh. Tellingly, the bodies I most identify with and as, "Latina bodies," are named (and thus inscribed) by language. Latin, the language of the first Christian empire, now signifies the language of the Spanish empire under the power of which these "types of bodies" were (literally) born.[2] The imperial word became flesh. Today the imperial language names bodies, even of those who have never spoken it or are no longer able to do so. The linguistic label is, however, insufficient for erasing the carnality of that colonial history. Words cannot perfectly obliterate (or reveal) the "memory of the flesh."[3]

My theological reflections about the body do not attempt to solve the ambivalence from which they spring. Quite to the contrary, my hope is to intensify the ambivalence. This is perhaps the best way to capture what I think is distinctive about the contemporary Latina sources with which I am in dialogue: namely, attentiveness to the uncertainties and ambivalence of the meanings of their own bodies—both flesh and word. In this essay I identify two conceptual splits that affect cultural and theological ideas about embodiment: the fracture between divinity and flesh and the concomitant one between nature and culture. I argue that these problematic dichotomies tend to become inscribed in the common uses of categories of race and ethnicity—just as in those of sex and gender. Constructive theologies of the body that are critical of the stigmatization of colored bodies and attentive to the concerns of Latinas and Latinos and African Americans must question the implicit dualisms of these common categories. In placing these constructions against the backdrop of colonial ideologies on the one hand, and contemporary Chicana/o literature on the other, I look at the particular dilemmas that affect the definition of Latina/o bodies as "mixed race." I hope to complicate the claims that *mestizaje* (cultural hybridity) is necessarily apolitical and that it reflects an attempt to deny the African or indigenous heritage of Latinas and Latinos. The criticism and longings drawn from the sources presented in this essay inspire my closing suggestions for imagining the body in its embodied transcendence.

## *Flesh and Spirit*

The dualism of flesh and spirit has especially preoccupied feminist and ecofeminist theologians, for they have long recognized that the suspicion or even contempt against bodies lends support to the subordination

of women.[4] This dualism is inscribed in and supported by the idea of a disembodied God. A view of God that emphasizes God's independence and separation from matter and flesh depends upon the disparagement of embodiment. In the words of Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The disembodied nature of the ... divine ... has served as a linchpin of the Western masculinist symbolic."[5] As an attribute of God, disembodiment becomes a supreme value that tends to orient the religious life away from the concerns of the body. Like the philosophical traditions with which it has always been in conversation, Christian theology has imagined the salvific trajectory of individuals as a movement away from the body and materiality.[6] Becoming more spiritual is imagined as entailing absolute control over the demands of the body.

Historically, the presumed ability to dominate the body has been unequally distributed. In this social imaginary, certain bodies are seen as more inextricable from materiality than are others. Bodies of women and those of darker complexion especially have been assigned the role of carrying the burden of materiality. The bodies of those who have performed the manual labor both inside and outside the home that society has consistently undervalued have been construed as the source of their inescapable fate. Patriarchy has described women as "naturally" inclined to (mostly physical and repetitive) domestic labor.[7] Similarly, colonial and enslaved subjects have been represented as rationally defective, perhaps even devoid of a soul, and thus incapable of controlling their "natural" (read "bodily") instincts.[8] They have been represented as wholly flesh.

## *Flesh and Words*

In recognizing these representations of bodies as contributing to the legitimization of their oppression, feminist theorists' body talk has been marked by caution. This ambivalence is even more pronounced among women of color. As Karen Baker-Fletcher argues, historically the bodies of black women "have been forcefully displayed and spread for curiosity, amusement, observation, and consumption."[9] This gross objectification of women's bodies warns us of the dangers of any uncritical celebration of the body that would again place women on the side of a "natural" construed as that which resists spirit and culture.

Feminist deconstructions of patriarchal subordination have depended in large measure on challenging the appeals to the "natural" essence of womanhood typically tied to the body as the site of biological determin-

ism. "One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman" was Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement of this stance.[10] Gender, as opposed to sex, became the name under which feminism struggled. The emphasis on identity as performed that characterizes the work of postmodern theorists like Judith Butler follows in that tradition.[11] One is certainly not born a Latina but rather becomes one in the context of political struggles through acts of identification. But if we affirm that indeed one becomes a woman and, in my case just recently, becomes a Latina, are we not joining John's gospel in asserting that the flesh is useless?[12]

Attention to the social construction of gender may still reproduce the nature/culture dichotomy. As Butler notes: "Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex."[13] On one hand, gender may seem to have no place for bodies. On the other hand, the split between gender and sex has seemed to imply that while gender is constructed, sex is "natural." A body gets conceptually fractured in its cultural and biological components.

A similar dilemma appears to be at work in discussions of ethnicity and race. Like gender, ethnicity emphasizes the social construction of identity through culture and custom. Ethnicity highlights the performative aspects of identity, which are most often conceived as freedom from the biological constraints of the body. Crudely stated, whatever biological intractability race appears to have, ethnicity is culturally constructed. When culture becomes the main focus, the effects of being bodies, and thus always already being signs that are read within defined semiotic systems, tend to fall out of sight. Ethnicity is at risk of losing the body altogether. The split between race and ethnicity, like that between sex and gender, risks reinscribing the construction of race as "natural"—and if natural also unconstructed, given, self-evident, and fixed.[14]

The use of categories of race and ethnicity frequently becomes a stumbling block in the discussions between African Americans and Latinas and Latinos on the subject of the body. Latinas and Latinos in the United States often waver between adopting "United States Latinas and Latinos" as a racial category, and define it instead as an ethnic one referring to culture, custom, and language. Those who opt for ethnicity often assume the racial definitions enforced by society in the United States. Some even call themselves "white women of color."[15] I must confess to be puzzled

by such a description—it is one in which I sense an attempt to disown the indigenous and African foremothers without which "Latina heritage" loses all historical specificity. My personal response is perhaps best captured by a refrain I heard often during my childhood in Puerto Rico: "Y tu abuela a'onde e'tá?" (And your grandma, where is she?).[16] This well-known refrain, used colloquially as well as in music and poetry, is a recognizable shorthand for mocking claims to be "white," the implication being that the person is attempting to hide her or his ancestry. For historical reasons that I will touch upon below, light skin is not always considered equivalent to being "white"—whatever "white" means in the sense of the term as used in the United States. Surely, this personal account is not a description of how differences of skin color function in Puerto Rico; such a description is not my goal in this essay. Instead my comments are meant as a reminder, for the reader and for myself, of the multiple, shifting, and conflicting meanings of these categories: creating interpretative difficulties that are only intensified when the conversation crosses national boundaries, as it does when it involves Latinas and Latinos in the United States.

As an ethnic label Latina/o refers to a wide range of traits, some of which do not leave visible (or readable) marks on the body. Thus the emphasis on ethnicity foregrounds axes of oppression that do not neatly follow the black/white paradigms of racism in the United States. However, discussions about ethnicity too often neglect the body and, significantly, the primary meaning of skin color in the United States. Critiques of cultural imperialism shall thus be complemented by discussions of the racialization of bodies foregrounding the inextricable links between culture and flesh. These are complex issues that need to be addressed more deeply through honest dialogue, which the contributors to this volume intend to promote. I want to suggest that, as in the case of the discussions of gender versus sex, this requires not simply choosing between ethnicity and race but also looking more closely into the different worldviews from which our notions of embodiment emerge.

## *(In) Visible Ancestry*

To say that society in the United States is organized around a black/white dichotomy has become almost tautological. The dominant culture conceives of race as discrete and binary.[17] Latinas and Latinos frequently observe that such a structure offers no space from which to claim their own

collective identity, although the terms Hispanic or Latina/o often seem to function as a category comparable to black and white. However, the dilemmas that Latina bodies introduce to the system of representation in the United States cannot be addressed simply in terms of inclusion or exclusion from the existing social structures but rather requires a critical look at the ideological frameworks that inform our categories of analysis.

Robert Young in his study of the intersections between desire and race in colonialism observes that while "today's racial politics work through a relative polarization between white and black," colonialism worked also through systems of "degrees of deviance." That is, the position of people in the social hierarchy was reflected by their degree of deviance from the norm represented by those who embodied the image of the colonizer. Because of their attention to the outcomes of sexual encounters between rulers and subjects, systems of degrees of deviance linked racial difference with social and sexual deviance. As a result, "none was so demonized as those of mixed race."[18] Indeed the very idea of a "mixed" race is only meaningful within ideologies that assume the existence of discrete or "pure" races.[19] The territories under Spanish rule were considered the prime example of despised impurity. "Let any man turn his eyes to the Spanish American dominions, and behold what a vicious, brutal, and degenerate breed of mongrels has been there produced, between Spaniards, Blacks, Indians, and their mixed progenies," declared one Jamaican slaveowner.[20]

Complex systems of gradation according to inheritance and skin color were developed in Latin America and the Caribbean, including dozens of categories: mulatto, mestiza, chino, cuarteron, creole, quintero, zambo, and so forth. But despite the colonialists' sustained efforts to classify their subjects, "racial" inheritance would unavoidably become less readable from peoples' bodies, and sometimes it was altogether invisible. This unsettled relationship between biological inheritance and physiognomy has had lasting effects in the conceptions of race and blood, which cannot always be assumed to be visible.

It can be argued that colonialism is "the dominion of the eye."[21] The proclaimed inferiority of the colonized subjects must appear as natural and evident—an illusion that is accomplished by fixing visible physical traits in colonial discourses. The stereotype must acquire the status of "common knowledge" in colonial discourses.[22] Thus when mixed progenies threaten the supposed certainty of visible evidence (skin color, for instance), they become problematic for colonial rule.[23] The anxieties caused by the disruption of visual correlation can be seen in the following statement by Sir

William Lawrence: "Europeans and Tercerons produce Quarterons or Quadroons (ochavons, octavones, or alvinos), which are not to be distinguished from whites; but they are not entitled, in Jamaica at least, to the same legal privileges as Europeans or the white Creoles, because there is still a contamination of dark blood, although *no longer visible*. It is said to betray itself sometimes in a relic of the peculiar strong *smell of the great-grandmother*."[24] As blood slips away from the dominion of the eye, the slightest sign becomes potentially important for the discriminating rulers—in this case even something as elusive as smell is constructed as evidence for colonial categorization. Since "contamination of dark blood" is not easily detected, all colonial subjects are under suspicion and become the object of obsessive scrutiny.[25] All senses must be called upon to uncover the secrets of the other's body.

According to Young, from the 1840s onward the ideology of race "necessarily worked according to a double logic"; that is, "it both enforced and policed the difference between whites and non-whites, but at the same time focused fetishistically upon the product of the contacts between them."[26] The so-called mixed races became the focus of the sexual fantasies—the "uncontrollable sexual desire" and "limitless fertility" of the other—that drove racial theory. In short, mixed races were material evidence of illicit sex. As the emphasis on the distinctiveness of the races increased, so did the fantastic portrayal of mixed peoples as the incarnation of sexual degeneracy.

Although there are evident differences between the historical contexts described above and our own, important aspects of these racial ideologies still haunt us. People who fall outside the boundaries of visibly recognizable race categories are subject to the suspicious scrutiny of others; their bodies are searched for clues of their biological makeup and for anything that may clarify the question of origins—even if it is "a relic of the peculiar strong smell of the great-grandmother." The intensity of these investigations betrays their link to concerns of sexual order and to fascination with its transgression.

## *Performing Bodies*

Recognizing the common ideological roots of the ambivalence toward "mixed" peoples and of the belief in fixed classifiable races can help us more critically engage representations of black and Latina bodies in the United States imaginary and our attitudes toward them.[27] The traces of the ambivalence toward "mixed raced" bodies can be detected in contempo-

rary discussions of mestizaje. Stephen Knadler in his essay " 'Blanca from the Block': Whiteness and the Transnational Latina Body" challenges the claim of the mestiza as a "symbol of a liberating transnational and transracial identity." Knadler argues that despite the deployment by Latinas of the mestiza as an alternative to the racial paradigms in the United States, "many representations of the mestiza, even those coming from the margin, can preserve the strong normative function of whiteness and trivialize, if not completely erase, the mestiza's African diasporic history and culture."[28] For Knadler the mestiza has been constructed ideologically as a "blanca from the block"—a Latina identity that responds to the values of "white America" and thus reinforces their normativity. He traces this problem, for example, in two novels: the Dominican American Julia Álvarez's *In the Name of Salome* and the Cuban American Cristina García's *The Aguero Sisters.*

Knadler also sees this problematic tendency in the image of Jennifer Lopez—both in "JLo's" public persona and in the roles that she performs in movies. Knadler questions the "plasticity" of the representations of Lopez's body that allow her to represent and thus appeal to different groups: she appears as a Mexican woman, a Puerto Rican from el Barrio, and even an (almost) white woman. She presents "herself as a Latina and as a transracial American diva."[29] This kind of performative fluidity is "never some final transgressive *liberating crossing of borders,*" as some Latinas claim. Quite to the contrary, it is "an on-going recombination, which changes as different social groups and economic and political forces try to shape this identity formation."[30]

The observation that fluidity does not necessarily result in the subversion of normative values is an important one, especially where hybridity becomes a central category of analysis, as it does in Latina theory and theology. But it is also dangerous to restate identity as delimited by clear borders that can be crossed in any final way, perhaps conveying the misleading impression that an adequate conception of identity is one that, unlike mestizaje, considers racial or ethnic categories as fixed, lacking "on-going recombination," not changing in response to "different social groups and economic and political forces." All identities are the product of ongoing recombination. To challenge the naturalization of racial constructs that support imperialist and racist discourses we should foreground the historical and cultural roots of all categories of identity. In other words, it is crucial to resist the split over nature versus culture operative in race and ethnicity discourses. We must further question the assumption that

political alliances must be grounded on an assumed homogeneity or distinctiveness of race.

If we interpret racism in the United States exclusively as a self-other system of representation, mestizas would simply be considered others—that is, different from the norm. However, from the perspective of a social structure based on "degrees of deviance" we receive a more complex picture of social hierarchies in which bodies are judged not by their fit into discrete categories but by their degree of conformance to an imagined standard. Both systems of classification coexist in the context of the United States. In a framework based on degrees of deviance, the mestiza is placed on a comparative scale according to visible traits: more or less black (or white). This scale applies to all representations of bodies, and across a wider range of physical traits. For instance, poverty, obesity, and disability also function as markers of deviance, albeit in different ways, in relation to the privileged white norm. Attention to these other social markers allows us to see the dehumanizing representations of black and Latina bodies in their relationship with the broader cultural problems that affect women.[31]

That the in-betweenness of representations of Latina bodies can be coopted in the struggles of racial authorization is hardly in question. Indeed, there are many instances in which Latina/o self-representations mirror that of the dominant culture in the United States. And yet mestizaje/mulatez might be the only alternative available in order for some Latinas to claim precisely what Knadler worries they might deny: their "African diasporic history and culture."[32] The problematics of Latina representation that Knadler detects are perhaps not the result of embracing mestizaje but of understanding mestizaje as a place between two purely and contrastingly defined groups: black and white. Such a conception places Latinas at the site of racial and political confrontation between two groups that are construed as opposite poles. As we observed above, the cultural paradigms of racial segregation and of fetishistic fixation with the "mixed race" have a common origin and intent that we must be attentive to as we evaluate representations and attitudes that pit black and Latina bodies against each other. Latina/o bodies can hardly be imagined much less accepted and loved in the richness of their ancestry without grappling with the tensions of their symbolical association with racial and sexual betrayal.

Given the colonial sexualization of mestizaje discussed above, it is hardly surprising that the discussion of just how "black" JLo really is carries sexual undertones. As Knadler observes, the media attention to Lopez's ample derriere "can provoke a primitivist fetishization." Replay-

ing centuries-old colonial sexual fantasies, the (desired) derriere becomes a metonym for blackness. "In this fascination with the otherness of the Latina's possibly inherited black body, we see the struggle of mainstream society in the United States to define and regulate just how *black* the mestiza can be before she is no longer a '*white* woman of color.' "[33] This intense concern to define the amount of "blackness" seems to replay the scene of a colonizer trying to detect the smell of a great-grandmother, and thus accurately place the colonized subject in the social hierarchy. And once again we find an intense preoccupation for defining, detecting, and decoding the marks of the flesh to link bodies to stereotypical representations—a concern inscribed by sexual fantasy.

The "Latina" bodies that Jennifer Lopez performs are not quite de-Africanized. They represent no obliteration of racial impurity but instead, quite to the contrary, the haunting of denied fantasies of sexual and racial transgression that still provoke fear and fascination. It is no accident that Latinas are so frequently portrayed as the muse and temptress of "white" men. Consider Lopez's role in *Shall We Dance?*, in which she threatens the otherwise strong marriage of a "white" man and woman. Consider another example, this one involving the actress Paz Vega. In *Spanglish* Vega plays the part of a Latina maid, whose role as potential supplanter of a white wife is accentuated by the role of her daughter as the potential usurper of the love of the white mother for her white daughter. In the latter case, the movie portrays a competition between two not-so-white potential daughters: the young Latina and an "overweight" white girl. Being overweight is temporarily ruled a worst deviance than being Latina. Represented as a threat to society, the mestiza becomes the heir of the deviled women both blamed for and symbolic of communal betrayal and defilement.[34] It is always tempting for spectators to join the crowd in accusing such women of the humiliations to which their communities are subject, and this is perhaps the goal of these accusatory representations—that is, to shift the blame away from the patriarchal systems that continue to view women as objects of exchange.

The hopeful, or even celebratory, aspects of the body of literature that advocates the embrace of mestizaje are often discussed and questioned. But reducing the ambiguity of mestizaje in order to place it neatly within the dominant United States symbolic structure prematurely dismisses what might become productive tension between competing views of the world and the body and, further, may reify racist paradigms. Here I would like to focus on the potential of the writings of self-proclaimed mestizas

and mestizos to highlight the peculiarity of the seemingly self-evident categories with which we think about our "ethnosexual" selves, to "identify otherwise outlawed epistemologies and ontologies" and perhaps even inspire us to imagine new ones.[35]

## *Reconciliation of the Flesh*

The works of the Chicana writers Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga and of the Chicano Richard Rodriguez are each starkly different in ideological stance, style, and strategy. Richard Rodriguez's *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* especially stands out for its problematic stance in almost every key political issue regarding minorities in the United States, but the sentiments expressed by his frequently provocative statements offer windows into paradoxes that affect the topic I address in this essay. Furthermore, the social imaginary from which these writers speak—who in addition to being Chicana/o are queer—is also in contrast with my own. These named distinctions certainly do not exhaust the differences between these writers and me—or those touching Latina/o lives. But I call upon these categorized differences to stand symbolically as guardians to protect us from the illusions of being capable of representing a coherent cultural stance.

Despite the stabilizing effect of Latina/o as a label of identity, the starting point of these authors is not one of certainty but of puzzlement. *Brown* recurrently foregrounds the question of the meaning of the author's own color. From the world described in the writings of white Americans ("the part of America where I felt least certain about the meaning of my brown skin") to an interview with Malcolm X (where "I felt invisible, as anonymous, as safe as I have ever felt") brownness is a sign that invites and resists being deciphered.[36] While these examples pertain to public sociopolitical identification, Moraga takes this questioning of the meaning of her skin color to the intimacy of her familiar home. Pained by the awareness that her own light skin has given her privileges that are denied to her own mother, Moraga calls attention to the unreliable grounds of social identification.

*See this face?*
Wearing it like an accident
Of birth
It was a scar sealing up
A woman . . . [37]

Moraga describes her experience of having her body read in the United States: a complex heritage reduced to the visage, to the visible. Skin for

Moraga is not necessarily the mark of her ancestry, but it is also and simultaneously its denial. An accident and a scar that separates her from the mother, or unites her with her oppressor. Although as Knadler points out a lighter skin can easily lead to powerful participation in a system of clearly demarcated fields of power, it is often also a source of estrangement. For Moraga this estrangement is felt viscerally, for "the object of oppression is not only someone *outside* my skin, but the someone *inside* my skin."[38] The ambiguity is inescapable. "Both strains contributed to their bodies, to their waking spirits. I am the same distance from the conquistador as from the Indian," explains Rodriguez, and he draws the crucial implication that "righteousness should not come easily to any of us."[39] Ambiguity is directed toward self-scrutiny.

It is not only the complexity and irreducible multiplicity of biological inheritance that these writers scrutinize as they ask, in Anzaldúa's words, "Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? . . . Which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which is the baggage from the Spanish father?"[40] They also highlight the almost comical implications of the differentiations between race, ethnicity, and social ideology: "Pero es difícil differentiating between lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto,"[41] Anzaldúa ponders. In contrast with the apparent clarity and stability of the theoretical categories that are used to describe it, self-identity is evidently conflictive and puzzling. In highlighting the perplexity of her own attempts of self-representation, Anzaldúa calls into question the compartmentalization of identity produced by the reification of categories of analysis.

Thus representation and embodiment are drawn closer together—a development that is offered as a challenge to the "illusion of precision about race categories."[42] Rodriguez's *Brown* is as much a celebration of the racial impurity associated with Latinas and Latinos as it is a critique of—and invitation to move beyond—the cult of (imagined) purity in United States culture, where there is "no seem to seeming; no nurture to naturalness."[43] At the heart of United States culture's privilege of purity, Rodriguez argues, is a repression of a male erotic fantasy and an enforced silence around the history of race in the United States: "When mulatto was the issue of white male desire, mulatto was unspoken, invisible, impossible."[44] And brown bodies find themselves at the terrible site of the unnamed desires of the American symbolic—a madness that is most often not their own. But the goal of these Chicana/o authors is to turn that anxiety into a provocation that may lead to a deeper questioning of the very foundations of society in the United States. Brown thus becomes a category of analysis: "Brown made Americans mindful of tunnels within their bodies, about which they

did not speak; about their ties to one another, about which they did not speak. This undermining brown motif, the erotic tunnel, was the private history and making of America."[45] And the return of that which has been suppressed causes violent anxiety.[46]

The challenge to acknowledge and perhaps even embrace impurity entails an epistemological shift to recognize "the ability of language to express two or several things at once, the ability of bodies to experience two or several things at once."[47] And this affirmation of multiplicity is also a sexual challenge. For the privilege of oneness over multiplicity is part of what the French feminist Luce Irigaray terms phallocentrism—that is, patterns of thought founded on the privilege of the male organ and therefore bear the marks of masculine morphology. Phallocentric thought patterns share "the values promulgated by patriarchal society and culture, values inscribed in the philosophical corpus: property, production, order, form, unity, visibility . . . and erection." And, further, "the value granted to the only definable form"—that of the male organ—not only excludes female eroticism, but generates a "systematics of representation and desire" that confers the highest values to the "*one* form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning."[48] Irigaray turns to female morphology—"*neither one nor two,*" a nearness that does not long for becoming one—to provide an alternative vision for overcoming the phallic economy of the one. But she never pursues the potential of this multiplicity for articulating the complex intertwining of race, ethnicity, and sexuality in a single body—which is *not one.*

Moraga may, like Irigaray, imagine a sex which is *not one.* But in writing from the conflicted space of racial and sexual wars Moraga represents the social constitution of bodies through figures of not only multiple but also partial or wounded forms of embodiment. For instance, a woman's skin appears as the site of memories of the touch of the maternal dwelling, as it does in Irigaray's work. But skin is also the site of painful and guilt-ridden separation: Moraga's light skin is a sign of her distance from her brown mother and thus a reminder of her complicity with a racist society. Her skin is a "scar sealing up a woman." From another perspective, however, Moraga is brown. In United States society, she is "darkened" by her desire of women; Moraga's sex, she observes, is "brown."[49] As we observed above, the standards of whiteness include a wide range of "biopolitical" traits.[50] "By incorporating pain, difficulty, and failure in the re-imagining of a sexual and social world, [Moraga] represents a non-redemptive vision that obliges the reader or spectator to account for the conflictive social and cultural contexts providing the arena for sexual experience."[51] She

imagines bodies that are not yet whole, which are portrayed in her plays as dismembered bodies. These disjointed bodies dramatize the internal wars that afflict them and their yearning to be reborn as one—or at least as a multiplicity capable of lovingly touching itself. For these bodies, the promise of caressing their own multiplicity (as Irigaray's woman does) is yet to be fulfilled.

"Can what love has bound together as flesh be reconciled?"[52] This question by Rodriguez looms large for these authors. While Moraga's depictions are characterized in the passage above as "nonredemptive," the works by Anzaldúa and by Rodriguez do offer visions of embodiment that may allow these bodies to lovingly caress their multiplicity—without having to become one. Anzaldúa calls for the development of a "mestiza consciousness" that moves beyond a "counterstance" toward a new way of life. Rodriguez dreams of the liberation of the flesh from the burden of the demands of purity.[53]

Rodriguez's and Anzaldúa's transformative visions entail not only accepting the heritage that has thus far formed Latin American self-conception but also embracing the open-endedness of identity: "Brown, not in the sense of pigment, necessarily, but brown because mixed, confused, lumped, impure, unpasteurized, as motives are mixed, and the fluids of generation are mixed and emotions are unclear, and the tally of human progress and failure in every generation is mixed, and unaccounted for, missing in plain sight."[54] Given the particular colonial history of Latinas and Latinos—which is the history of their becoming bodies—it is hardly surprising that much of their self-representation is characterized by a strong destabilizing, disseminating, perhaps deconstructive impulse.

This taste for uncertainty might sometimes seem at odds with the demands for clarity of political struggle. But the processes of self-definition—speaking from and about our bodies, for instance—are best served by cycles of construction, questioning, deconstruction, reconstruction. The dialogue between black and Latina/o theologies might offer a context in which our differences lead to a healthy appreciation of the openings and closures that are coupled within our bodies and our words.[55]

## *Transcendence in the Flesh*

Creating theological visions appropriate for the redemption of bodies is a crucial step toward liberation. This endeavor is consonant with the commitments at the heart of black, womanist, and Latina/o theologies. Positioning the acceptance and love of black and brown bodies as a central

demand of God-talk challenges Christian theology to face the implications of an incarnational faith: divine word has taken flesh. Through their analysis of oppressive words and their effects on bodies, black, womanist, and Latina/o theologies have recognized and confronted the ambivalent power of words by refusing their objectifying power and reclaiming the authority to redefine the meaning of words such as black, woman, Latina/o, and mestiza/o. A theology of the body that is attentive to the historical realities of those who have been represented as wholly flesh cannot dream of any simple return to the flesh, just as it cannot continue to reduce bodies to their sociopolitical and economic placement. Instead, it must find ways to reconcile *word* and *flesh*—as well as spirit and matter, transformation and memory.

The split between these aspects of existence is inscribed in the theological ideas of immanence and transcendence. Immanence is associated with that which is inside creation, in the flesh. Unfortunately, creation, and thus immanence, is often conceived as a self-contained system locked within the boundaries of what is already given. Transcendence, on the other hand, is associated with the freedom of the spirit—beyond, pure, unlimited by materiality. Articulating the "theological weight" of physical bodies requires a challenge to this dualism, for the dualism conceives materiality, and thus bodies, in mechanistic and deterministic ways that always need an external principle to enliven them.[56]

In Marcella Althaus-Reid's interpretation, the deconstruction of the dualism of immanence and transcendence is implicit in Latin American liberation theology, which "is based on the search for the materiality of transcendence." Attending to the transcending aspect of the material world, liberation theology "knows how God is to be found in the presence of the untouchables."[57] This transcendence is not conceived as an ability to escape physical limitations but as openness to transformation beyond what has already been received and beyond the self. As the Latin American liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría notes, we can see "transcendence as something that transcends *in* and not as something that transcends *away* from; as something that physically impels to more but not by taking out of; as something that *pushes* forward, but at the same time *retains*."[58] The very life of creatures and their transformations are signs of divine transcendence.

At an individual level this notion of transcendence may help us resist the ideologies that objectify our bodies by reducing them to the dominion of the eye, or to the assumed determinations of narrowly defined notions

of "race" or "sex" within the paradigms of nature as opposed to culture or spirit. Instead, we may conceive of transcendence as a force that impels us to "create ourselves," but not in the fashion of an external god that has no use for matter or for the past. Instead of dreaming of abandoning our bodies to create ourselves in absolute freedom from the past, we can see the process of self-creation as driven by a force that impels us to more and that pushes us forward at the same time that it retains us. Creating ourselves through our relationships with others and with the divine is perhaps best imagined as rebirth, where the transcendence of the new is always already taking flesh. Rebirth reminds us of our own beginning in the flesh and in the womb, and it invites us to new embodied beginnings and to incarnate transcendence.

Reimaging transcendence in the flesh entails overcoming the objectifying tendencies that affect descriptions of others and ourselves. Bodies are visible signs within semiotic systems but not only that. As incarnations of transcendence, bodies exceed the limits of representation. Even if signs are always already written on the flesh, no word or image can fully grasp the mystery of creatures. That mystery, however, is inextricable from the names and categories through which we represent our bodies. A theology of the body must recover the transcendent dimension of the body, but that transcendent dimension must not be detached from the realm of the social and the world of representation. The incarnation is always "casting iridescence over nominal triumphs of the word, and flesh . . . always carries the word inscribed on its inmost parts."[59]

Latina/o theological anthropologies have attempted to reconcile the sociopolitical body and divine word by emphasizing a sacramental understanding of reality. In the words of Miguel Diaz, the common element in these anthropologies is a commitment "to underscore very specific social, gender, cultural, and political experience for encountering grace."[60] However, we need not only to bring these elements together but also to foreground their inextricability. The transcendence of bodies entails not only the linkages of bodies with the divine but also (and simultaneously) the relationality of bodies with their own pasts and with other people.

Rather than seeing individuals as self-contained entities that can be placed in discrete categories, we can learn to see the ways in which we are connected to others through the ties in which one life extends in time as well as in space. Although the societies that we live in put us into categories and those categories affect who we might become, we are not reducible to such categories. No name or category can possibly describe all

that a person is. This is not because we are absolutely unaffected by social structures or one another, instead it is a result of the complex and infinite relationality of creatures. The transcendence of the person is that which exceeds all representation. It is neither abstract nor otherworldly but rather is openness at the heart of relations.

Each aspect of a person's identity develops in relation to realities that transcend her or his particularity but also in which she or he transcends: community, race, gender, sexual identity, and so on. For instance, the realities of my own community—its history, its language, the geography in which I feel most at home—all embrace me not only as *past* realities but as things that I continue to relate to, be transformed by, and transform. And yet I never grasp them, just as they never completely define me. These transcending realities exist only in particular persons. That is, they are never fully present, as such, and never appear in isolation from other aspects of a person's life. In each person, different realities meet and transform one other in unique ways. Our encounter with others touches and is touched by realities that transcend us both. In each encounter these realities elaborate themselves by "acquiring an internal richness, writing its *exegesis* on the bodies named."[61] In each encounter with others, with our past and our heritage, we open ourselves to new incarnations of transcendence—that is, to new births of blood and flesh, and the will of woman and man, *in* God.

*Notes*

1 See Norton, *Bloodrites of the Post-Structuralists.*

2 Derrida has coined the term "Globalatinization" to refer to the universalization of the religion of Rome. See Derrida and Vattimo, eds., *Religion.*

3 I borrow the phrase "memory of the flesh" from Luce Irigaray.

4 This has been amply argued in feminist scholarship. For a founding feminist text that addresses this issue, see Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk.*

5 Ibid., 269.

6 For one account of the philosophical tendency to imagine human development as a journey away from the body, see Irigaray, "Each Transcendent to the Other" in *To Be Two.*

7 The identification of women with materiality and the body is well documented in feminist theory. See Spelman, "Woman as Body."

8 The ontological status of the inhabitants of the Americas was a central issue in the legal debates concerning Spanish colonization, as exemplified by the famous disputation between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de

Sepúlveda. At issue was the question of whether the natives could be defined by the Aristotelian category of "natural slaves." See Arias, *Retórica, historia y polémica;* and Hanke, *All Mankind Is One.*

9 Baker-Fletcher, "The Erotic in Contemporary Black Women's Writing," 208.

10 Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 281.

11 See Butler, *Gender Trouble.*

12 Of course, this is a simplistic statement that does justice neither to John's gospel nor to feminist theory. My purpose here is only to highlight the challenges of foregrounding the material specificity of bodies while revolting against social constructions of particular bodies.

13 Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 10.

14 "Race is just as much a political concept as economic class. . . . Neither ethnicity nor skin color determine race; race is determined politically by collective struggle" (Hardt and Negri, *Empire,* 104).

15 Knadler, "'Blanca from the Block,'" 3.

16 The phrase comes from a poem by the Puerto Rican writer Fortunato Vizcarrondo entitled "Y tu agüela ¿aónde está?"

17 A parallel tendency can be observed in conceptions of sex that lend normativity to heterosexuality. See Butler, *Gender Trouble.*

18 Young, *Colonial Desire,* 180.

19 To signal the dependence of the concept of a "mixed race" on the very ideology that I am seeking to challenge I place the term mixed in quotation marks.

20 Young, *Colonial Desire,* 175. Similarly, the United States missionary Robert McLean declared the following about Puerto Rico: "The Spaniards did not draw the color line very closely, consequently the population was decidedly mixed both as to color and to blood. *This mixture was bound to cause many complications*" (Robert McLean and Grace P. Williams, *Old Spain in New America* [New York: Association Press, 1913], 106; italics added).

21 Norton, *Bloodrites of the Post-Structuralists,* 33.

22 See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* especially 66–84.

23 Norton, *Bloodrites of the Post-Structuralists,* 33.

24 Sir William Lawrence, *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man, Delivered to the Royal College of Surgeons* (1819), quoted in Young, *Colonial Desire,* 177 (italics added).

25 In fact, revolutions in South America would be blamed on the detrimental effects of racial mixture on people's character.

26 Young, *Colonial Desire,* 180.

27 The question of the relationship between these and the ideologies of multiculturalism remains to be explored.

28 Knadler, "'Blanca from the Block,'" 1.

29 Ibid., 3.

30 Ibid., 2 (italics added).

# CREATING OURSELVES

## AFRICAN AMERICANS

## AND HISPANIC AMERICANS

## RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

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editors



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