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Believing in an Otherwise
Studying Religion as Spiritual Activism

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Article abstract

This paper will propose that Gloria Anzaldúa's "spiritual activism," as a praxis wrought through the confluence of the spiritual and the political, could also be a model for embarking upon the study of religion differently. Walter Mignolo emphasizes that to understand what it means to decolonize requires specificity, through "looking at other W questions: Who is doing it, where, why, and how?" I shall suggest that spiritual activism as a decolonial framework demands that scholars of religion ask themselves, in turn, what they believe.

Believing in an Otherwise: Studying Religion as Spiritual Activism

Lucie Robathan, *McGill University*

My initial vision for this paper was to chart a framework for a possible decolonial mode of religious studies scholarship. I began this task fairly speculatively and theoretically, using conjecture as my reflex for responding to the optional face of decoloniality. As Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh remind us, decoloniality is a provocation, but not a prescription: it is an option to be and to do differently.[1] The paths of decoloniality disobey and dodge the architecture of coloniality, a matrix of power relations characterized by and sustained through epistemic control and a universalizing "cosmic vision."[2] The decolonial option then recalls the possibilities of "undoing and redoing"[3] the ideological apparatus that supports coloniality as an epistemic and aesthetic edifice. To be optional, however, is not to be trivial. The challenge of decoloniality in relation to scholarship's "quest for knowledge"[4] is urgent. Otto Maduro's Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion in 2012 brought this

1. Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
2. Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/ Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 177.
3. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 119.
4. Otto Maduro, "2012 Presidential Address: Migrants' Religions under Imperial Duress: Reflections on Epistemology, Ethics, and Politics in the Study of the Religious 'Stranger,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 1 (2014): 40, https://www.jstor.org/stable/i24488015.

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urgency squarely to the attention of religious studies scholars, to whom he issued an appeal to "hear the cry of the oppressed and to respond to that cry, with our power, our ethical responsibility, and our role in the production and dissemination of knowledge, in any and all forms within our reach."[5]

However, in writing this I have found it difficult to see through the coercive epistemic force of coloniality, especially when it comes to inhabiting this process of undoing and redoing, not just as an epistemic task, but as an ethical and political one as well. I have been warned that my impulse as a white, British scholar of religion steeped in the ethics of modernity has been to search for tools I can put to use; to constrict and circumscribe decoloniality into a utilitarian method that sources ideas as instruments. Following a decolonial pathway, conversely, means not just preserving the radical delinking that it performs on the hierarchical order of knowledge within coloniality, but also preserving the materiality and location of decolonial interventions as embodied modes of experience, knowledge, and feeling. To borrow from Rodolfo Kusch, this undoing and redoing cannot be approached as a problem of management. Kusch describes what he refers to as a Western attitude to understanding the world, as "not a question of the world in general, but rather only of the gadgets, drugs, and management of them that will save us."[6] What the question of management demonstrates, Kusch's exploration suggests, is a sense of understanding as *compensation* rather than understanding as a *commitment*.[7] Below, I try to follow a decolonial pathway that responds to Maduro's plea on

5. Maduro, "2012 Presidential Address," 46.
6. Rodolfo Kusch, *Indigenous and Popular Thinking in América* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 13.
7. Kusch, *Indigenous and Popular Thinking in América*, 14. As Kusch goes on to ask, "[T]o justify a life, which one [is] better? Is it better to use ways that commit one's self or ways that do not entail commitment?"

the level of theory. At the same time, this exploration is itself also a praxis, meaning both that what I explore contains and signifies realities irreducible to ideas, and that I am offering this regrounding as a commitment to the ongoing work of hearing past "white noise."[8]

There are three threads upon which this paper will pull; or incitements to which it will respond. Firstly, alongside Anibal Quijano, I will approach decoloniality on one level as an epistemic task, one that has to do with unthinking and rethinking the totalizing violence of colonial epistemological authority. The second thread adds to this epistemic task a spiritual dimension, in which spirituality has the potential to recall and reproduce decolonized/ing subjectivities,[9] and in which concepts of the spiritual function as alternative and resistant ways of "coming to know."[10] The final thread weaves the "ethical impulse"[11] into the task of decoloniality, as an insistence that decolonial pathways are shaped not just by thinking and knowing, but by wanting, defending, and believing in something different.[12] These three threads together – the epistemic, the spiritual, and the ethical – underscore the significance of de-

8. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 145.
9. An Yountae, *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2017); An Yountae, "A Decolonial Theory of Religion: Race, Coloniality, and Secularity in the Americas," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 4 (2020): 947–980, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfaa057.
10. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 84.
11. Peter Kulchyski, "What is Native Studies?" in *Expressions in Canadian Native Studies,* ed. Ron F. Laliberte (Saskatoon, SK: University Extension Press, 2000), 20; see also Emma LaRoque, "'Resist no Longer:' Reflections on Resistance Writing and Teaching," in *More Will Sing Their Way to Freedom: Indigenous Resistance and Resurgence,* ed. Elaine Coburn (Halifax; Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2015).
12. An anonymous reviewer for *Arc* pointed out that these could be indexed as modes of feeling, rather than (or as well as) knowing.

coloniality as a praxis,[13] involving conceiving of, constructing, and committing to an otherwise. I will propose that Gloria Anzaldúa's "spiritual activism," as a praxis wrought through the confluence of the spiritual and the political, could also be a model for embarking upon the study of religion differently. Walter Mignolo emphasizes that to understand what it means to decolonize requires specificity, through "looking at other W questions: Who is doing it, where, why, and how?"[14] I shall suggest that spiritual activism as a decolonial framework demands that scholars of religion ask themselves, in turn, what they believe.

This matters, because the question of how to study religion in a way that is accountable to the decolonial project does not have a robust and reliable answer. The study of religion has been largely absent from the decolonial tradition, meaning both that the role of religion as an ideological instrument of (secular) colonial politics, and the histories and possibilities of religion as a mode of decolonial resistance, remain underexplored. As An Yountae has articulated, this limits the capacity of decolonial thought fully to capture the relationship between religion and colonial power, and stifles the potential of the domain of religious studies to engage in the crucial project of rethinking its dominant epistemic frameworks and undoing the violence enacted therein.[15] There has been decolonially motivated scholarship emphasizing the theological logics of coloniality;[16] the function of secularity as the mode through which religion operates to

13. Mignolo and Walsh in particular emphasize the praxical character of decoloniality. See Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality.*
14. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality,* 108.
15. An, "A Decolonial Theory of Religion."
16. Filipe Maia, "Betrayed by Accent: Theological Notes on a Racist Worldsound," in *Religion and Sustainability: Interreligious Resources, Interdisciplinary Responses,* ed. Rita Sherma and Purushottama Bilimoria (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022).

support coloniality;[17] the possibilities of religiously inflected decolonial resistances;[18] and the option of re-founding and politicizing theological thought through decolonial frameworks.[19] However, the issue remains that these interventions are built on ground which at the same time impels us to problematize the concept of religion as a stable category, making this ground itself unstable. Following Tomoko Masuzawa's seminal critique of the "invention of world religions,"[20] with which she reminds us that the notion of religion itself as an object of study is the result of European colonial intellectual history, I find myself as a scholar left with a conundrum: how to study religion as/and decolonial critique without a sense of what the category of religion entails? How to preserve the radical character of the decolonial option, while also dissolving the boundaries of the object of study? As a way through this I have been developing an approach to scholarship as personal praxis, wherein the object of study (the category of religion) is subordinated to the transformative and liberatory possibilities emerging from our engagement with it.

17. An, "A Decolonial Theory of Religion."
18. Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (Nyew York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
19. Mayra Rivera, "Where Life Itself Lives," in *Beyond the Doctrine of Man,* ed. Joseph Drexler-Drei and Kristien Justaert (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019); Mayra Rivera, "Embodied Counterpoetics: Sylvia Wynter on Religion and Race," in *Beyond Man: Race, Coloniality, and Philosophy of Religion,* ed. An Yountae and Eleanor Craig (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
20. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Decoloniality as an Option

The decolonial option evolved as a substantially epistemic task from Anibal Quijano's inception of the notion of coloniality, which called attention to the overwhelming and violently panoptic nature of knowledge production under colonial power relations.[21] Quijano insists that alongside and beyond European colonial domination, coloniality encompasses the universal presumptions of modernity and rationality that were co-constituted and solidified through the "coloniality of power."[22] The paradigm of modernity/rationality consists in "the subjection of every part to [the] unique total logic"[23] of historically specific European modernity, imposing the individualism and objectification of this historical logic onto the totalizing framework of rationality as knowledge. Recalling that the overarching hierarchical essentialism of colonial modernity has suppressed alternative forms of thinking and being, decoloniality is rooted in perspectives that have been silenced and marginalized through not just a colonial politics, but a colonial epistemology.[24]

An Yountae has drawn attention on another level to the (necessarily) spiritual dimension of the decolonial project, by highlighting the role of religion in scaffolding the "colonial regime of power and knowledge,"[25] and the theological-political principles

21. Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: View from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353.
22. Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality."
23. Quijano, "Coloniality of Power," 176.
24. Quijano, "Coloniality of Power"; Enrique Dussel, "Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism," *Nepantla: View from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 465–478, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/23901; Walter Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture and Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2009): 159–181, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275.
25. An, "A Decolonial Theory of Religion," 948.

of sovereignty and salvation that underpin colonial notions of both the subject and the state.[26] He maintains that the decolonial counterpoint of this collusion between religion, power, and knowledge is manifested in the "political possibilities cultivated by [anti-colonial] spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic sensibilities,"[27] and the radical re-imagining of the sacred through the work of Afro-Caribbean/Latin American, and Black/transatlantic thinkers.[28] An confronts the meaning of and relationship between the political and the spiritual in light of the collective trauma of the colonial wound, conceiving of the exile consciousness[29] of those displaced in and through the colonial abyss as a poetic "groundless ground" of the sacred.[30] An's decolonial contribution thus characterizes epistemic resistance in part through Derek Walcott's notion of "spiritual stubbornness,"[31] which speaks to the process, at once sacred and heretical,[32] of reimagining and recreating the world outside of the colonial image. This intervention demands that the decolonial option engage with the decolonizing potential of the spiritual as epistemic insurgency, recalling Linda Tuhiwai Smith's notion that spiritual knowledges represent "one of the few parts of [Indigenous peoples] which the West cannot decipher, cannot understand and cannot control […] yet."[33] While Quijano presents decoloniality as primarily "epistemological decolonization"[34] from the epistemic dominance of

26. An and Craig, *Beyond Man.*
27. An, "A Decolonial Theory of Religion, 960.
28. Cf. An, *The Decolonial Abyss*.
29. An draws upon Eduoard Glissant's notion of errantry to theorize exile as a mode of relational identity-consciousness.
30. An, *The Decolonial Abyss*, 138.
31. An, "A Decolonial Theory of Religion," 970.
32. With this term I am drawing from Mayra Rivera, who impels scholars to be "*heretics* against our own order of knowledge." See Rivera, "Embodied Counterpoetics," 79.
33. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 84.
34. Quijano, "Coloniality of Power," 177.

Eurocentrism, I want to extend and expand the notion of knowledge, alongside An, to encompass the politically and epistemically rebellious – and decolonially defiant – potential of spiritual sensibilities.

This makes especially resonant Emma LaRoque's expansion of the project of decolonial resistance through the "ethical impulse,"[35] which further adds the work of responsibility and imagination to the task and function of scholarship.[36] LaRoque's intervention reminds us that a decolonizing epistemology is rendered on the personal and practical level alongside a commitment to what one believes in, so that both "resistance and invention," or "deconstruction and reconstruction,"[37] are implicated in doing our work differently. This difference, therefore, entails *committing to* as well as conceiving of an otherwise. This notion of commitment brings to light the politicized edges of our judgements and priorities: what the urgency of the decolonial option reminds us, then, is on the one hand the co-implication of knowledge and ethics, and on the other hand the "power structures, dynamics, allegiances, and interests in which we are involved and which bound and limit both our knowledge and our ethics ([or, in other words,] politics)."[38]

Spiritual Activism as Crossing the Bridge

As a possible praxis modelling and enacting this commitment, I am drawn to Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of spiritual activism, with which Anzaldúa issues an invitation to incite social change through spiritual consciousness. As Susy Zepeda maintains,

35. LaRoque, "'Resist no Longer,'" 5.
36. I am grateful to Yann Allard-Tremblay for alerting me to the significance of the ethical impulse in answering the question "what does it mean to decolonize?"
37. LaRoque, "'Resist no Longer,'" 5.
38. Maduro, "2012 Presidential Address," 38.

Anzaldúa's writings are "path openers"[39]: she opens decolonial pathways that lay their tracks across material identities and borders; mediate between the spiritual and the physical; and mirror the work of the "ancient chamanas who choose to build bridges between worlds."[40] Her writing, as she says, is also a form of "making bridges," through which the physical work of writing "con la mano" becomes an activist effort of communication.[41] The notion of bridges is loaded, recalling Cherrie Moraga's exhausted complaint in the preface to *This Bridge Called My Back* that women of colour's bodies get "thrown over a river of tormented history to bridge the gap"[42] rendered through racist coloniality, along with the vow with which she ends her reflection that she will "lay [her] body down"[43] for the women of colour she writes with and for. Anzaldúa's bridge is further a model for allyship, which insists that the interdependence and relationality between people contains the possibility of "white people […] allowing change to come into their lives"[44] through the act of dislocation. As a white reader of Anzaldúa, I find my route into the bridging work of her words through her insistence on consciousness as the impetus for connection. She suggests that it is possible to shift out of whiteness as a mode of thinking and relating to others – as

39. Susy Zepeda, "Decolonizing Spirit in the Classroom," in *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices,* ed. Martha R. Gonzales and Lara Medina (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 372.
40. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 93.
41. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Making Alliances, Queerness, and Bridging Conocimientos: An Interview with Jamie Lee Evans (1993)," in Gloria Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2000), 206.
42. Cherrie Moraga, "Preface 1981," in *This Bridge Called by Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (San Antonio: Third Woman Press, 2002), xlvi.
43. Moraga, "Preface 1981," L.
44. Anzaldúa, "Making Alliances," 209.

"'white' consciousness"[45] – through deep recognition of our interconnectivity: a mode of consciousness or intuition that inhabits both knowledge and feeling, rendered in her terms by the notion of *conocimiento* as a skill, which I will flesh out below. To walk the bridges laid out in her writing is therefore to listen, as she puts it, with the inner and outer ear,[46] which also captures the centrality of the spiritual embedded in this focus on consciousness.

Anzaldúa's spiritual activism is, further, an enactment of *spiritual mestizaje,* which is both an "awareness that we are all on a spiritual path and share a desire that society undergo metamorphosis and evolution,"[47] and a recollection of the *mestiza* location from which she is writing and acting. In fact, it is her identity as a *mestiza* that defines the "new consciousness" she describes.[48] Straddling and struggling between cultures, languages, and borders, the "mestiza consciousness" incites an expansive disintegration of dualistic and hierarchical thinking, from an embodied and experiential awareness of being "un *amasamiento*."[49] Anzaldúa writes from the "borderlands": the physical, linguistic, racial, sexual, and spiritual borders that render their inhabitants disoriented and undetermined, and mark them as 'other.' As a queer, Chicana, feminist of colour, Anzaldúa shapes her thought around the borders that make up her identity, and insists that the disorienting effects of the border make it a powerful space from which to produce transformative and life-affirming knowledge. By both revealing and destabilizing the lines drawn between us, the experience of the borderlands is one of overlapping and multiple worldviews. While her border thinking is

45. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 152.
46. Anzaldúa, "Making Alliances," 206.
47. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 44.
48. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 77–91.
49. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 81.

initiated by and tied up intimately with her own social identities, it is also an incitement to listen across dualisms and divisions. Indeed, she maintains that "ignorance of power, ignorance about each other's histories, ignorance about other ways of living and other perspectives"[50] is a form of *desconocimientos,* an absence or refusal of the skill of intentional, outer and inner communication.

The meaning of spirituality as a mode in Anzaldúa's thought is expansive: she defines spirituality as "a symbology system, a philosophy, a worldview, a perspective, and a perception. Spirituality is a different kind and way of knowing."[51] While spirituality can take many different forms, she argues that it is marked by the discovery of meaning and a longing for a different world. In this way, it encompasses and crosses the inner and the outer, involving the inner work of reflection and perception, but also the outer work of struggling to transform the world. This reflects and precipitates her motion that it is "by changing ourselves that we change the world," via the two-way movement – the inner and outer work of recreation – that traverses "what the world is, and what it should be."[52] As such, consciousness is the site at which the dialogic work of transformation invites itself inwards in order to be directed outwards, and where the spiritual is experienced on the level of desire for as well as belief in an otherwise.

As a scholar of religion, I am particularly struck by this self-reflexive rendering of the spiritual, and how participating in this notion might help to re-orient the study of religion towards what the world "should be." Spirituality is not the same, for Anzaldúa, as religion in its formalized sense, remaining always political and

50. Anzaldúa, "Making Alliances," 197.
51. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 38.
52. Gloria Anzaldúa, "La Prieta," in *This Bridge Called by Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (San Antonio: Third Woman Press, 2002), 232.

always purposeful.[53] She therefore presents us with a notion of believing and enacting that can be articulated across the "contested meanings and definitional boundaries"[54] of religion as a term, along with the accompanying and often intertwined concepts of the sacred and the spirit. The way she articulates her activist vision takes the notion of religion into the flesh: "I am trying," she describes, "to create a religion not out there somewhere, but in my gut."[55] Taking Anzaldúa's wielding of spirituality as a starting point on a decolonial pathway, how might the scholar of religion approach religiously inflected schemes and ideas not just as objects of study, but as routes towards socio-political transformation?

Anzaldúa's model of spiritual activism imbues the notion of spirituality with action and intentionality, so that spirituality becomes itself a path towards social justice. In her words, spiritual activism is an amalgam of "the traditional practice of spirituality […] with the technologies of political activism,"[56] which explores the social implications and political possibilities of spirituality practices. Spiritual activism in Anzaldúa's conceptualization refers in particular to the outer work of spiritual practitioners inspired by the strength of their inner resources, so that spiritual activists are those who treat the spiritual "as a political issue," doing "outer work as well as inner work."[57] I am inspired by this to wonder whether, by

53. See AnaLouise Keating, "Risking the Personal: An Introduction," in Gloria Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas,* ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–15.
54. Meredith B. McGuire, "Contested Meanings and Definitional Boundaries: Historicizing the Sociology of Religion," in *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
55. Anzaldúa, "La Prieta," 232.
56. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 19.
57. Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa papers, box 64, Benson Latin A Institute, University of Texas at Austin, cited in Brenda Sendejo, "The Cultural Production of Spiritual Activisms: Gender, Social Justice, and the Remaking of

suggesting a transgressive and pragmatic task for the spirit, spiritual activism as a mode of relating has the potential also to reframe the task of religion scholarship, starting with an interest in the sacred in order both to struggle with the material realities of the physical world, and to envision the practical possibilities of spirituality. I take Anzaldúa's invitation as an opportunity to approach my own area of study with the imaginative potential to "[open] the road to both personal and social change."[58]

I am deeply indebted here to AnaLouise Keating, who takes inspiration from Anzaldúa to consider how "spirit-inflected perspectives"[59] can support social justice work. She begins with Anzaldúa's spiritual activism to explore and enact a politics based on her own location and beliefs, arguing that the infusion of the spiritual into the political gives us a new set of tools for challenging injustices.[60] In this way, Keating provides a blueprint for approaching religion scholarship as a political task on the register of what one *believes in*. She points out that "references to spirit, souls, the sacred, and other such spiritually inflected topics are often condemned as essentialist, escapist, naïve, or in other ways apolitical and backward thinking."[61] Anzaldúa's spiritual activism, on the other hand, lays the groundwork for social justice choices and scholarly perspectives that take spirituality as politically and practically significant – and indeed, Keating maintains that Anzaldúa presents a challenge to both activists

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Religion in the Borderlands," *Chicana/Latina Studies* 12, no. 2 (2013), 62, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43943329.

58. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 55.

59. AnaLouise Keating, "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe': Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 1–2 (2008): 5.

60. AnaLouise Keating, "Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Transformation, and the Politics of Spirit," *Entremundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

61. Keating, "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe,'" 55.

and theorists to think differently in light of this.[62] I am trying to chart how a decolonial study of religion could entail approaching "spirit, souls, the sacred, and other such spiritually inflected topics" with a spiritual activist commitment to their disruptive political potential.

Politicizing the Spirit

Anzaldúa insists that academic study that dismisses the practical and material relevance of the spiritual in practitioners' lives amounts to what Edith Turner has termed "intellectual imperialism."[63] Moreover, she continues, spiritual practitioners themselves regularly disassociate from the political implications and inducements of their beliefs, ignoring materiality at the level of personal spiritual practice. This depoliticizing of spirituality refracts across colonial power lines to dismiss the marginalized worldviews and knowledges of people deemed "other" by "dominant cultures,"[64] so that disregarding the significance of the spiritual becomes another form of colonial aggression both ontologically and epistemically. This resonates with numerous decolonizing and Indigenous critiques that expose how colonial logic operates in part by ignoring or refusing both the spiritual or sacred significance of political and material convictions,[65] and the political or material significance of spiritual commitments[66] – inciting the argument that spiritualities

62. Cf. Keating, "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe,'" 66.
63. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 38.
64. Cf. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 89.
65. Leroy Little Bear, "Jagged Worldviews Colliding," in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision,* ed. Marie Anne Battiste (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000); Leanne Simpson, "I am Not a Nation-State," *Unsettling America,* November 6, 2013, https://unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/2013/11/06/i-am-not-a-nation-state/.
66. Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arneiter Ring Pub.,

themselves can be decolonizing, by disrupting the "colonial mindset."[67] Insisting on the political and praxical substance of the spiritual in this way substantiates my inquiry, wherein what it might mean to commit to a decolonial study of religion involves acknowledging and engaging in "spirituality's social implications;"[68] developing and committing to a politics based on a belief in and for a decolonial otherwise.

Part of the work of politicizing the study of religion in the colonial academy is paying attention to the "particular realities" in which we consist – being mindful of the "politics of utterance"[69] through which we re-create these realities in our patterns of thought, speech, and action – in order to expand our own frame of reference. Anzaldúa understands the struggle of accessing and understanding this larger frame of reference as a spiritual one, maintaining that the knowledges we hold via our identities and experiences are partial, and that the realities these knowledges inscribe are also partial. This notion is even more radical than it might first appear: for Anzaldúa, the incomplete and constructed nature of both our epistemological and our ontological frameworks begets the possibility of "transformational processes and the constant, ongoing reconstruction of the way [one views the] world,"[70] so that it is through ac-

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2011); The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, eds., *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: ARP Books, 2014).

67. Judy Iseke, "Spirituality as Decolonizing: Elders Albert Desjarlais, George McDermott, and Tom McCallum Share Understandings of Life in Healing Practices," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 35–54, https://jps.likebrary.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/19142; see also George J. Sefa Dei and Cristina Jaimungal, eds., *Indigeneity and Decolonial Resistance: Alternatives to Colonial Thinking and Practice* (Bloomfield: Myers Education Press, 2018).

68. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro,* 39.

69. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro,* 103.

70. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro,* 39.

knowledging our partiality and positionality that we can embark on social (and self-) transformation.

Expanding Scholarly Consciousness

To understand how spiritual activism might be a decolonial option for the study of religion, and how the role of spiritual activist might be taken up meaningfully by a white religious studies scholar, we need to chart the various epistemological, ontological, and ethical commitments rendered through Anzaldúa's framework. This involves attending to the ways in which Anzaldúa knits knowing, being, and doing together through the conceptual tools she uses to form her decolonial account of reality/ies. Her account posits an overlapping not just of spiritual and material worldviews, but of the spiritual and material worlds.[71] Keating describes Anzaldúa's position as "a spirit-inflected materialist ontology,"[72] in which the ordinary and the nonordinary are different and complementary parts of the same larger reality. Through this interweaving, Anzaldúa is able to hold together both a deep concern for the material experience of social injustices, and a reliance on the transformational power of "imagination's soul dimension."[73] Given this overlap of worlds and worldviews, Anzaldúa situates her thinking in *nepantla,*[74] the "place

71. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 25; see also Keating, "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe,'" 54.
72. AnaLouise Keating, "Editor's Introduction," in Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/ Luz en lo Oscuro,* xxx.
73. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 28.
74. Indeed, Anzaldúa demonstrates her commitment to the in-between with her very adoption of this Indigenous term. *Nepantla* is a Náhuatl word meaning, in her definition, "el lugar entre medio." (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/ Luz en lo Oscuro*, 28*)* Anzaldúa's use of this word demonstrates and enacts her belief in borderland identity and identifying.

between worldviews."[75] Anzaldúa aligns herself with all those who live in the in-between, in a *nepantla* state, who she insists have a particularly expansive awareness and understanding of the world(s). Bringing our attention to the borders in our internal worlds, she saturates the notion of *nepantla* with spiritual significance, describing it also as the liminal state "between the spirit, the psyche, and the mind,"[76] and therefore a "space that simultaneously exists and does not exist."[77] This realm of *nepantla* is experienced on the level of both knowing and being, and animates transformative ways of doing:

> When you're in [*nepantla*], you're able to slip between realities to a neutral perception. A decision made in the in-between place becomes a turning point initiating psychological and spiritual transformations, making other kinds of experiences possible.[78]

Anzaldúa highlights the unique and socially crucial knowledge wrought through the borderlands, rooted in the experiences of racialization and alienation. However, in a typically borderless way, she offers these experiences as an invitation for others to think, be, and do differently, by working to inhabit and experience *nepantla* on the level of consciousness and feeling. She remains hopeful that white people could also become *nepantleras,* beginning with a disinvestment in the privileged state of mind of white consciousness.[79]

Since I see my scholarship as political and ethical work, I see in Anzaldúa's invitation the option to engage as a scholar of the religious with *nepantla* as both a material and an immaterial state:

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75. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro,* 150.
76. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas,* ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2000), 7.
77. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 28.
78. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 150.
79. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 152.

both insisting on the urgency of engaging with marginalized experiences from *otros mundos,* and using the perceptions and perspectives generated in the borderlands as a framework for thinking otherwise myself. In fact, the scholar of religion in general occupies an intellectual and imaginative space that could be particularly conducive to this task, since our work is often in a relationship with the notion of the sacred that we could describe as liminal. Leaning on Victor Turner, as indeed Anzaldúa does, we can think of the zone of liminality as "the point of contact between the worlds of nature and spirit, between humans and the numinous (divine)."[80] By marking the sacred in its many and various permutations as an object of study, religious studies scholarship is itself (dis)oriented between inner and outer experience, bordering overlapping worldviews, and dealing with or deferring to epistemologies in which the spiritual holds significant weight. As such, scholarship about and on religion already has the latent potential to be disruptively transformative in its thinking, if scholars can "learn to swim in this liminal space."[81] This learning to swim is a practical and political project: as Maduro puts it, "above all, religion needs to become a social space in which we wrestle with the question of who is to make such judgements [about whose lives are sacred and whose lives are sacrificable], where, and how."[82] Anzaldúa's bridging work reminds us that this sociality is also a skill that can be practiced internally.

"*Nepantla*," Anzaldúa elaborates, is the place where transformations are enacted."[83] She moves from the liminal to the pragmatic – from perception to enactment – through the notion of *conocimiento,* another term which encompasses and interweaves the

80. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 28.
81. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 87.
82. Maduro, "2012 Presidential Address," 46.
83. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 56.

epistemological, the ontological, and the ethical, by making consciousness capable of healing. *Conocimiento* is a way of thinking, an expanded consciousness, that emerges through the split perspective triggered in *nepantla,* transcending rationality by holding spirituality as a form of knowledge. We can see through this concept how Anzaldúa creates a larger onto-epistemological tapestry, in which the self, the social, and the spiritual are interconnected, and therefore how the notion of the sacred can be employed in the service of social justice. *Conocimiento* engenders "subversive knowledges"[84] out of this interconnection, and in turn these knowledges challenge the power structures that devalue such ways of knowing. The link between thought and action in *conocimiento* lies in the impulse of healing: it is awakened through the struggle to heal the self, and is impelled by the struggle to heal the world. Anzaldúa understands that this heightened awareness built and enacted through the struggle for healing is also called "love,"[85] which helps us to make sense of the fact that *conocimiento* is both a consciousness and a call to action.[86] On the level of scholarship, we might think of it in terms of responsibility: responsibility to the spiritual sensibilities we study, and to the otherwise to which they might point. In fact, Sheila García Mazari describes how the stages of *conocimiento* provided her the route towards unlearning internalized white supremacy in her own academic context, by "moving away from a dualistic understanding of knowledge creation."[87] In religious studies scholarship we are

84. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 110.
85. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 40.
86. This can be further understood by thinking about *conocimiento* both as insight, the English term with which Anzaldúa translates it in her 2001 Foreword to *This Bridge Called My Back,* xxxvii, and as a skill, which she explains in "Making Alliances," 206.
87. Sheila García Mazari, "Beyond El Arrebato: The Seven Stages of Conocimiento as Instruments for Radical Reflection and the Unlearning of White Supremacy Culture," *Reference Services Review* 50, no. 1 (2022): 41,

regularly confronted with realities and worldviews that are different from our own. As Mazari also suggests, Anzaldúa's practice offers a way towards "seeking to understand the varied perspectives found outside of your constructed understanding of the world."[88]

It is through *conocimiento* that spiritual activism is initiated, and we can see from the larger conceptual structure that spiritual activism is therefore a praxis. Christopher Tirres notices how praxis "undergirds both poles"[89] of spiritual activism: spirituality is manifested as praxis through the imaginative act, while activism becomes praxis through its intentionality. As a praxis, spiritual activism is "a two-way movement – a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society."[90] And as a praxis, it recalls that spirituality, as a process of recognizing and discovering meaning, can in turn create meaningful social change. To bring this notion of praxis into the work of religion scholarship would mean to see religious knowledges in terms of the tools they offer the oppressed as a form of "transformative engagement."[91] In fact, my suggestion resonates with Pamela Klassen's reflection on futures for the study of religion in relation to the contemporary Indigenous Water Protectors movement, in which she argues that religious studies could – and should – be driven by personal responsibility for and awareness of "our own being in the world, as collectives and as embodied beings

https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/RSR-07-2021-0030/full/html.

88. Mazari, "Beyond El Arrebato," 43.

89. Christopher D. Tirres, "Spiritual Realities and Spiritual Activism: Assessing Gloria Anzaldúa's *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, *Diálogo* 21, no. 2 (2018): 60.

90. Anzaldúa, "La Prieta," 232.

91. Tirres, "Spiritual Realities and Spiritual Activism," 60.

who depend on the earth to provide for us."[92] Focusing on how religion as a (multifarious) concept is conditioned by our relationships with the land, she concludes that "taking the time to think about the grounds on which one stands […] and asking what one's specific place calls one to do can offer meaningful new paths of connection in research and teaching."[93] Thus Klassen's argument, like mine, emphasizes the role of the scholar of religion in thinking about the meaning and meaningfulness of our object of study in relation to transforming the world.

Spiritual Activism as Critical Awareness

Spiritual activism, by offering spirituality as a route towards social change, therefore presents me as a scholar of religion with the option to re-consider how religion scholarship engages with the spiritual. In fact, Anzaldúa reminds us that the notion of the spiritual, given its irrational and experiential grounding and its creative and imaginative power, is in itself an academically disruptive idea, transgressing the institutional privileging of objective rationality.[94] I think we can take from this that the study of religion has the inherent potential to subvert academic disciplinary boundaries and norms, dealing as it does already with concepts and practices undefinable and illegible through the logic of rational modernity.[95] As scholars

92. Pamela Klassen, "Back to the Land and Waters: Futures for the Study of Religions," *Religion* 50, no. 1 (2020): 90–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.181106.
93. Klassen, "Back to the Land and Waters," 95.
94. See Sendejo, "The Cultural Production of Spiritual Activisms," 62.
95. Here I align myself with Joseph Winters, who argues that Anzaldúa's work "challenges, and points beyond, the kinds of rigid disciplinary demarcations that continue to organize the academy." See Joseph Winters, "Mestiza Language of Religion: Gloria Anzaldúa," in *Cultural Approaches to Studying Religion: An Introduction to Theories and Methods,* ed. Sarah J. Bloesch and Meredith

interlocuting with spiritualities as they manifest in people, places, and practices, we can harness this transgressive potential by asking how spirituality as knowledge and desire provides "meaningful new paths of connection" with our own commitments to thinking and doing differently.

Sonya M. Alemán and Flor de Maria Olivo suggest that we can understand spiritual activism as mapping out "a process for cultivating an individual critical awareness and self-reflexivity that renders social transformation of hierarchical oppression possible."[96] With this definition, they draw our attention to the transformative consequences of spiritual activism for critical thinking. This is a useful framing for the purposes of my exploration, providing a way into understanding how spiritual activism might be enacted by doing scholarship differently. In fact, Anzaldúa suggests, as Christopher Torres clarifies, that critical thinking at its most expansive directs us beyond "subject-centered reason" towards the "capacious and universal"[97] scope of spiritually-inflected inquiry. I take this to mean not that spirituality is the highest expression of critical thinking, but that purposeful concern for others, and for other others (to borrow Sara Ahmed's incisive phrase[98]), necessarily expands the reach of our

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Minister (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 128. In fact, Winters receives from Anzaldúa a sense of a "nepantla ethic" (Winters, "Mestiza Language of Religion," 142), through which we can maintain a "precarious openness to disorientation, change, and movement" (Winters, "Mestiza Language of Religion," 134). Anzaldúa's framework, under Winters' thinking, becomes a suggestion for religious studies to traverse and transgress its epistemic boundaries.

96. Sonya M. Alemán and Flor de Maria Olivo, "Guided by the Itzpapalotl Spirit: Chicana Editors Practice a Form of Spiritual Activism," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 40, no. 1, (2019): 235. https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/17/article/719771/pdf.

97. Tirres, "Spiritual Realities and Spiritual Activism," 55.

98. Sara Ahmed, "This Other and Other Others," *Economy & Society* 31, no. 4 (2002): 558–572. https://doi.org/10.1080/0308514002200020689.

critical reflection beyond so-called reason and reasonableness. It also means that we cannot absent our selves from our thinking, so that our knowledge is always marked by the extent to which we can also be self-reflexive. In this way, Anzaldúa's model reflects the legacy of feminist standpoint epistemologies, but her decisive contribution here lies in her transcribing of these epistemologies on the ontological level, to emphasize the transformational potential of our own relationality with each other and the world. Indeed, this is what leads Robyn Henderson-Espinoza to argue that critical theory can embody Anzaldúa's vision for social justice.[99]

Imaginative Theorizing

Anzaldúan spiritual activism further underlines the onto-epistemological significance of the imagination, which conceptually repeats this transformative potential of an intertwined spirituality and politics. Anzaldúa maintains that imagination is necessary for transformation – and thus, with this term, recalls the creative and productive force of thinking differently. Reminding us that imagination can be a spiritual process and a political process, she argues that it is through imagining that "'other' epistemologies […] reach consciousness."[100] In fact, she places ontological weight on the imaginative process, insisting that it can invent and enact new realities by interrupting the ties between our consciousness, our history, and our beliefs. If we apply this to the work of scholarship, imagination becomes the mechanism through which we can direct

99. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, "Gloria Anzaldúa's El Mundo Zurdo: Exploring a Relational Feminist Theology of Interconnectedness," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (2013): 107–118. https://www.jstor.org/stable/jstudyreligion.26.2.107.

100. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro,* 44.

that which we study towards "personal and societal change."[101] This is reflected in Keating's own personal effort with spiritual activism, which she describes as the work of the imagination to "posit, explore, and in other ways enact"[102] her own beliefs. Susy Zepeda's example of engagement with spiritual activism in her pedagogy similarly takes up the call to (re-)imagine: she maintains that alongside Anzaldúa, imagination incites "possibilities for justice and transformation beyond the material world,"[103] meaning, in this case, beyond the materiality of racist heteropatriarchy under historical colonialism. Zepeda invites and facilitates multiple and personal notions of the sacred into the process of creating theory, describing how "Indigenous forms of spirituality, ceremony, and sacredness"[104] invoke a transgressive and transformative theoretical vision of decolonization.

Imagination therefore provides a link between our selves and our scholarship, reminding us that theorizing about religion is never wholly objective and detached.[105] By softening the border between the fabric of our selves and the fabric of the world, Anzaldúa's framework encourages scholars, across multiple and intersectional social identities, to think and write from our own commitments, while allowing that which we study to break into our perceptions and engender "new seeing."[106] In this way, too, theory and praxis become interdependent, mirroring Mignolo and Walsh's contention that under the terms of decoloniality, "theory is doing and doing is thinking."[107]

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101. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro,* 44.
102. Keating, "Shifting Perspectives," 252.
103. Zepeda, "Decolonizing Spirit in the Classroom," 373.
104. Zepeda, "Decolonizing Spirit in the Classroom," 372.
105. Cf. Winters, "Mestiza Language."
106. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 61.
107. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 7.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to think through how to approach the study of religion with a dual commitment both to a decolonial displacement of the universalizing logics buttressing the relationship between coloniality and religion, and to a decolonial upheaval of the category term "religion" as an object of study in the first place. In other words, I have tried to imagine a way of thinking differently for the study of religion that is enacted at the level of personal praxis, while also fixated on a socio-political otherwise. I have explored how Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of spiritual activism is a pathway through this sort of praxis, tracing the various thematic components of this idea to explore how she elaborates a mode for me as a white scholar to access the meaning and meaningfulness of scholarship on the personal and political planes.

Spiritual activism as a scholarly as well as spiritual commitment impels us to upend or clarify the purpose of our study, to focus not on the object of study (religion) itself as a disciplinary category, but on the transgressive and transformative potential of engaging with religiously inflected knowledges as routes towards (personal and) social change. Reversing the traditional and colonially implicated model of scholarship wherein the scholar is subject over the object of study,[108] scholarship as spiritual activism is scholarship that bears responsibility for its subject, its object, and the epistemological, ontological, and ethical possibilities it sparks. In this way, perhaps, believing in a decolonial otherwise is a spiritual task.

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108. Cf. Morny Joy, "Postcolonial and Gendered Reflections: Challenges for Religious Studies," in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives,* ed. Ursula King and Tina Beattie (London; New York: Continuum, 2005).

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