

BORDERLANDS/*LA FRONTERA* OF THE LATE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN DESERT:

SPACE, IDENTITY, AND THE ASCETIC IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT

Borderlands/*La Frontera* of the Late Ancient Egyptian Desert:

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Historians of late antiquity have noted the potential of Christian hagiography in constructing identities. Here I argue that it is not only the figure of the saint but also the space of the desert that should draw our attention. The saint and desert work together to produce a transformative identity. Methodologically this dissertation employs the theoretical insights of Gloria E. Anzaldúa in her now classic, groundbreaking work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. By looking closely at three important hagiographies, the *Life of Antony*, the *Life of Paul the Hermit*, and the *Life of Mary of Egypt*, I show that their descriptions of the desert are replete with spaces and inhabitants that render it a borderland or frontier space in Anzaldúan terms. As a borderland space, the Egyptian desert comes to function as a device for the creation of an emerging identity—that of the desert ascetic—while simultaneously the desert is created by emerging desert saint.

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INTRODUCTION

MAPPING THE EGYPTIAN DESERT, MAPPING IDENTITY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Cuando vives in la frontera
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you're a burra, buey, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half—both woman and man, neither—
a new gender

—Gloria Anzaldúa

In the 2011 short film, “Oh, the Places You’ll Go,” Teddy Saunders explores the resonances between Dr. Seuss’s eponymous story and Burning Man—the week-long music and art festival held in the Nevada desert, which bills itself as an experience and experiment in art and radical self-expression.¹ The film showcases a host of the festival’s participants in various states of provocative dress and undress. They each recite lines from the Seuss text and many animate their reading by performing either what the text suggests or different circus-like acrobatics and movements. The entire scene hints at the carnivalesque—with the backdrop depicting a makeshift city, neon lights and all—in the middle of the wide, dry, sun-scorched Nevada desert.

By juxtaposing the Seuss narrative (ostensibly a children’s book) with a glimpse of the conspicuously erotic art festival, Saunders interprets Burning Man as having an intimate relationship between space and identity, makes room for a queer rendering of each, and thus subverts both convention and expectation. What does it mean when someone says they are going *to* Burning Man? Is it a “place you’ll go,” as in a specified

¹ “What is Burning Man,” accessed August 18, 2013, <http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman>

location? Is it a series of events that have already been conditioned by their repetition year after year? Is Burning Man the behaviors expected of the participants when they “go there?” The film suggests that Burning Man is simultaneously a “Place You’ll Go” and a self you will become in that place. Therefore Burning Man hints at the interrelated nature of space and subjectivity—each continuously constituting the other. The invocation of the Seuss narrative helps to emphasize the point that it is indeed the *place* that makes the *self* and vice versa. In addition, Saunders’s treatment of Burning Man points to the persistent and potent symbol of the desert as a space of radical transformation.

What follows is an exploration of how Christian authors in late antiquity made use of the idea of the desert—above all, the Egyptian desert—as a literary vehicle for the construction of Christian identity. The same questions undergird this analysis. Is the desert a specific geographic location? Is it a series of conditioned events, responses, and processes of becoming? Or is it, crucially, both at once?

Others before me have, of course, emphasized the significance of the Egyptian desert in ascetic literature. In *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Peter Brown notes, “Despite their physical closeness to the settled land, the monks of Egypt towered in the imagination of contemporaries because they stood against an ocean of sand that was thought to stretch from Nitria to the furthest edges of the known world. They were a *new humanity*, settled where no human beings should be found.”² Brown hints at the intimate relationship between space and identity for late ancient Christians. While acknowledging the literary or imaginative character of both desert and saint, Brown seems nonetheless to slide easily from

² Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 216 (emphasis mine).

representation to reality. Of course, he is not alone in this tendency. Take, for example, Derwas Chitty's highly regarded study, *The Desert, a City*. Borrowing its title from a well-known line in Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, Chitty describes early Egyptian monasticism in terms of the desert into which Christian monks withdrew.³ The underlying aim of Chitty's argument is to demonstrate the historical transformation of the remote space of Egypt's arid desert into a metropolis of Christian ascetics. In a more recent study, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, William Harmless takes seriously the literary basis for the construction of the "early monastic desert"—as his title indicates.⁴ Nonetheless, his primary interest lies with the literal rather than the literary desert. In the introduction to his first chapter he gives a brief anecdote concerning Melania the Elder to illustrate his point: "The world of the desert fathers would have seemed remote, foreign, even to a sophisticated and highly educated woman like Melania. To begin to grasp it, we first need to see it against the broader landscape of fourth- and fifth-century Egypt."⁵ What ensues is a lucid account of desert asceticism in late antiquity viewed through a breadth of literary sources and genres—replete with maps, geographical and topographical analyses, and even a reading of John Cassian as mapmaker via his writings and his travels reflected in them. While Harmless recognizes and even substantiates scholarly assertions of the desert as literary construct, his argument rests on an understanding of the desert as a real space. He notes:

Some scholars, such as James Goehring, have strongly questioned whether the dominant image of the desert may be more literary than numerical. Many ascetics led their lives more like Antony's unnamed mentor or Pachomius's teacher

³ Derwas Chitty, *The Desert, a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism Under the Christian Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1966).

⁴ William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Palamon, holy men who dwelt within earshot of villages; or they gathered in communities along the Nile, like the Pachomians. Their asceticism was often fierce, but their *anachoresis*—their withdrawal—could be more social than geographical.⁶

Harmless agrees that the withdrawal described in ascetic texts could be more a literary element than a geographic reality. Still, his study focuses on the geographic reality of the Egyptian desert and its importance for understanding the phenomena of desert asceticism. Therefore, a description of Egypt's geography as well as an analysis of the annual rainfall in the region of the Nile River remain useful and pertinent to his study.

Harmless rightly notes that Goehring's work has been instrumental in pushing forward the argument that the desert in late ancient literary sources is a literary construct and should therefore be interpreted as such. Goehring's essays—many of them collected in his volume, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert*—have positioned the image of the desert rightly within its literary context.⁷ There he strikes a balance of understanding the desert as both a “real and imagined space.”⁸ He writes, “Of course the desert, a symbolic metaphor...was a physical reality in the lives of desert monks...it was the linkage of that reality with the symbolic power of the metaphor that generated the literary product.”⁹ Importantly, for my purposes, Goehring has suggested that Athanasius's *Life of Antony* established the literary motif in its description of the desert, a motif that would be picked up again and again by later authors. He writes:

Given the dominant influence of the *Life of Antony* in subsequent presentations of Egyptian monasticism, the later dominance of the desert imagery is perhaps no accident. The success of the *Life of Antony* is due in part, however, to the reality

⁶ Ibid., 283.

⁷ James Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Harrisburg: Trinity International Press, 1999).

⁸ A phrase borrowed from Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

⁹ Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert*, 87.

of the desert's influence in ascetic literary production in general. The desert's influence on literary production meant the other major literary sources all fit to a degree the Antonian model. The *Life of Antony* was such a successful model in part because it was a literary model, and those who wrote about monasticism wrote about or in the desert. As a result, to read monastic literature, both the literature produced by monks, and that produced about monks, was to read about desert monks. And as access to the early monks came to depend on the literature, the only monks that were remembered were those in the desert.¹⁰

Understanding the prominence of the desert imagery in the *Life of Antony* helps to establish the literary and imagined qualities of this real space. By weaving together the interplay between the real and imagined, Goehring establishes the influence of the *Life of Antony* as more than a literary model for constructing the desert saint because it equally constructs the Egyptian desert.

Building on Goehring's work, this dissertation will demonstrate how holy persons and sacred spaces are intimately linked in the Christian literary imagination: the desert produces the saint while at the same time the saint produces the desert, and both are products of the author's pen. Seen in this way, neither the subject nor the space is privileged. I argue that by understanding each (subject and space) as a constitutive element of the other one can better perceive the kind of literary analysis that allows for a more nuanced and complex understanding of the cultural potential of Christian hagiography in late antiquity. This kind of historical reconstruction is what Dale Martin has called a "hermeneutical enterprise."¹¹ Below I will detail how other scholars have

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Dale Martin, "Introduction," in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller eds., (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 18, as well as Elizabeth Clark's *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). Capturing what the "turn to language" in the historiography of late antiquity means, Martin claims, "Scholars working in late ancient studies no longer think of history as involving the objective discovery of the way things 'really were.' They realize that they deal almost exclusively with texts—with highly literary, rhetorically sophisticated texts at that... And many scholars working in late ancient studies, I would venture, are quite content to live with those limitations. After all, texts may be imagined as prisons, but they may also be imagined as infinite universes."

already interpreted Christian hagiography in this way. Still, debates regarding the historical utility and validity of Christian hagiography persist. For example, the 2006 publication of the newly renamed journal, *Church History and Religious Culture*,¹² published a series of articles that take as their point of departure, the ongoing debates about hagiography as a source for historical reconstructions.¹³ Rather than contributing to the discourses which seek to discern the historicity of ancient hagiography, I will instead detail the literary qualities of desert space and the concomitant construction of Christian subjectivity in three examples of Christian hagiographies: the *Life of Antony*, the *Life of Paul the Hermit*, and the *Life of Mary of Egypt*. In this way I hope to contribute to the ongoing scholarship on hagiography that suggests its utility in interpreting the ancient past regardless of the fictive elements that pervade these sources.

Through a careful analysis of each of these hagiographies, I will attempt to identify the essence of what Brown calls “the new humanity”—what I will refer to as desert *mestizaje* or Christian subjectivity—as it might have been imagined by late antique Christians. The Chicana writer, poet, and cultural theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa uses *mestizaje*—a term with a long and storied history of its own—in order to describe the multiple and potent influences of space and subjectivity for people living in the regions of the United States-Mexico borderlands.¹⁴ Therefore, while contributing most directly to the historical study of late ancient Christian literature, this dissertation is also located at the theoretical interstices of studies of space and studies of identity/subjectivity (via postcolonial studies). It draws especially on the theoretical insights of Anzaldúa’s

¹² The journal was formerly known as the *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*.

¹³ Jitse H.F. Dijkstra and Mathilde van Dijk, eds., *Church History and Religious Culture* 86: 1-4 (2006). While all of the articles relate to theme of hagiography as history, see in particular the essays by Frankfurter, van der Vliet, van Minnen, and Rapp as well as the introduction by Dijkstra and van Dijk.

¹⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987).

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, which offers a distinctive hermeneutical lens through which to interpret the relationship between space and identity in late antiquity.

As the title of her book indicates, the space that interests Anzaldúa is that of the borderlands or frontier, which is at once a very specific place and a generalizable type of landscape:

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands, are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.¹⁵

For Anzaldúa, frontier spaces are closely linked with frontier identities: she describes herself as a “Chicana, feminist, dyke from South Texas”—a variously marginalized identity forged in the borderlands of the Texas-Mexican desert.

This dissertation will explore the literary desert of ancient hagiography as a translatable frontier zone, sanctity as a frontier identity. I will say more about my methodology below, but I want here to briefly introduce the kind of “spatial reading” and discourses in which this dissertation participates. Succinctly put, hagiographies become the texts in which the Christian subject and the Egyptian desert can be inscribed. By examining these multiple and influential possibilities of Christian hagiography, this dissertation investigates how some Christian authors and contemporary historians came to imagine the Egyptian desert as an “ocean of sand” populated by a “new humanity.” That is, I will show the multi-directional flows of influence for *mestiza* space and identity.

¹⁵ Ibid., Preface.

The central argument will rest on readings of three particular Christian hagiographies ranging from the late fourth century to the early seventh century—Athanasius of Alexandria’s *Life of Antony*, Jerome’s *Life of Paul the Hermit*, and Sophronius’s *Life of Mary of Egypt*.¹⁶ I have chosen these texts for their vivid descriptions of the desert space into which the Christian ascetic recedes, as well as for their intertextual connections. The *Life of Antony*, in which the desert is said to have become a city, issues a challenge to traditional city life by describing the desert as equally communal and solitary. The *Life of Paul*, which explicitly engages and competes with the *Life of Antony*, constructs an ascetic identity that transcends the limits of humanity through the mythical depiction of the animal life of both saint and desert. Finally, the *Life of Mary*, which contains echoes of the mythical desert of the *Life of Paul*, depicts a desert both vast and arid in its solitude and erotically charged and a saint who matches the landscape.¹⁷ My readings of these texts will show that Christian hagiography offered its readers a complex and heterogeneous identity—one that transcends the bounds of humanity, gender, and sexuality, and even communal/social/ethno-racial/familial self-

¹⁶ While the *Life of Mary of Egypt* has been attributed to the authorship of Sophronius, the seventh-century patriarch of Jerusalem, debates have cast doubt over the authenticity of his authorship. See for example, Paul Harvey, “‘A Traveler from an Antique Land’: Sources, Context, and Dissemination of the Hagiography of Mary the Egyptian,” in *Egypt, Israel and the Ancient Mediterranean World: Studies in Honor of Donald B. Redford*, Gary N. Knoppers and Antoine Hirsch, eds., (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 479-99. The *Life of Antony* has also sparked scholarly debate regarding its authorship. See for example, Philip Rousseau, “Antony as Teacher in the Greek *Life*,” in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, Thomas Hagg and Philip Rousseau, eds., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 89-109, T.D. Barnes, “Angel of Light or Mystic Initiate? The Problem of the Life of Antony,” in *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 353-368, and David Brakke, “The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athansiana,” in *Orientalia* 63 (1994): 17-56.

¹⁷ While Mary’s desert is textually written as the Transjordan desert and not the “Egyptian desert,” a major part of the argument put forward in this dissertation is that by the time her hagiography was written, the Egyptian Desert was a potent enough symbol that it became a borderland in Anzaldúan terms—meaning the Egyptian desert could be geographically anywhere. It was a space that was imagined and functioned in a particular way.

definition—an identity beyond identity, perhaps. This understanding of identity hinges on ideas of boundlessness, of change and difference, of the play between recognition and misrecognition.

Hagiography: Making Space, Making Meaning

The function of hagiography in late antiquity has been the focus of many important studies. While the contributions of these works have varied in scope and purpose, many have focused on the role hagiography has played in the formation of a Christian identity. More than just a “holy life,” hagiography has been determined to be a hybrid genre of sorts—a genre that resists genre. In this way, my use of Anzaldúa’s theories of *mestizaje* and its concomitant queer reading seems apt.

Arnaldo Momigliano’s *The Development of Greek Biography* set the stage for the study of Christian hagiography that went beyond the early and persistent debates over its usefulness for the study of history. Momigliano’s *Greek Biography* illuminates the distinction between biography and historiography, describing the history of biography and its prominent emergence as a genre of literature independent of history writing.¹⁸ Glen Bowersock notes that Momigliano’s own thoughts and interests in Greek and Roman biography would develop into a conflation of “autobiography and biography with the concept of the person.”¹⁹ That is, according to Bowersock, Momigliano’s research had led him to understand biography and autobiography in antiquity as tools for the construction of the “self.” As Momigliano puts it, “The Greeks and the Romans realized that writing about the life of a fellow man is not quite the same as writing history... By

¹⁸ Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹⁹ Glen Bowersock, “Momigliano’s Quest for the Person,” in *History and Theory* 30:4 (1991): 27-36.

keeping biography separate from history the Greeks and the Romans were able to appreciate *what constitutes* a poet, a philosopher, a martyr, a saint.”²⁰ Establishing the purpose of biography as a constitution of a self is helpful for thinking further about the importance of space in these particular texts.

Patricia Cox Miller likewise describes the development of biography as a genre—divergent from history—in late antiquity and further suggests its importance as one of the discursive modes of production of the *holy man*.²¹ Her study focuses on two specific biographies, the *Life of Plotinus* and the *Life of Origen*. Building on the foundational work of Momigliano, Miller shows the continuation of a biographical literary tradition from earlier into later antiquity. Instead of seeing Christian hagiography as diverging from earlier Greek and Roman biographies, and part of a genre of aretology as scholars before her had, Miller highlights the similarities amongst a set of contemporaneous biographical texts in order to demonstrate “their integrity...as literary works in their own right, written to confront issues and problems in their own societies.”²² Furthermore, Miller argues that while authorial intention is always distant, remote, and unattainable, what biographies reveal to readers are in part a story about the author as well as that of its subject. “It is the biographer who is a silent mystery. He may be seen as the still prism brought to life by the active reflecting of ghostly shadows of his hero within himself. Then, a biography’s holy man images would be the author’s own faces.”²³ Miller’s understanding of Christian hagiography as at once confronting the issues and problems of the societies in which they were composed and at the same time a prismatic refraction of

²⁰ Momigliano, *Greek Biography*, 104. Emphasis mine.

²¹ Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 145-46.

the authors who composed them, is useful for my reading of these texts as identity makers.

In the introduction to their collection of essays on Greek biographies and panegyrics in late antiquity, Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau write:

Biographies and panegyrics offer a vividness of portraiture analogous to the almost tangible and vibrant images on the mummy cases of Roman Egypt. They make it possible to envisage the parade of ancient life, even its sounds, and the details of daily experience, of dress and gesture, of buildings, food, and entertainments. Even more, they invite us to believe we might gain access to the motives and sentiments of the subjects, their images of themselves, their ideals of behavior, their passionate ambition. Such impressions are dangerously misleading, partly because the authors had points to make about themselves (or truths to hide), but also because their texts, operating as we have seen within a tightly controlled tradition, were carefully designed to modify the attitudes and conduct of those who read them.²⁴

Hägg and Rousseau direct our attention to the problems inherent in using biography as a source for reconstructing the “real” lives of ancient subjects. Still, noting the highly sophisticated literary culture of the late ancient Mediterranean, they suggest that hagiographies can be a rich site for depicting the intricate relationships between authors, subjects, and audiences in late antiquity. And they further suggest that the act of writing a biography was a complex and sophisticated skill that was as much about “choreography as [about] syntax.” They go on to say, “So we are not presented with a peephole through which to observe an unsuspecting society...the subjects, dead or alive, were brought vividly before the mind’s eye only because biography and panegyric were acts as well as descriptive texts.”²⁵ This dissertation will consider the “choreography,” what Rousseau and Hägg refer to as the complex movements created by the hagiographer’s pen, homing in on the descriptions of desert and saint.

²⁴ Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau “Introduction,” *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau, eds., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 13-14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

More recently Derek Krueger has argued that hagiography and other Christian literary genres exemplify the practice of creating identity and authority for some late ancient Christians.²⁶ Krueger argues that authors were concerned with determining and projecting Christian identity onto the pages of the texts they created. “Authors represented their writings as part of their identities as disciple, monk, priest, deacon, devotee, pilgrim, prophet and evangelist, and even sinner. The emergence of such a range of writerly subjectivities coincided with the emergence of new styles of the Christian self.”²⁷ Thus, Miller’s suggestion that biographies function as prismatic refractions of their authors is important for Krueger’s exploration of hagiography. However Krueger further sharpens this thesis by demonstrating that “writers engaged in acts of simultaneous representation, producing at once both saint and self.”²⁸ If, as Krueger states, “Hagiography did, and does, offer images of holiness embodied, textual identities invested with cultural power,”²⁹ I will proceed by showing how desert space is described similarly invested with cultural power in these texts. And in this way, I will argue that writers are engaged in acts of multiple representations. Furthermore, Krueger’s argument relies on determining a chronology of the development of hagiography and in so doing he notes that the emergence of the genre suggests the construction of newer concepts of the self. So, just as Bowersock’s reading of *Greek Biography* suggests to us that Momigliano’s concept of Greek and Roman biographies demonstrate the construction of the self in antiquity, Krueger’s work demonstrates that this concept of the self in late antiquity was under constant negotiation and contestation. The increasing popularity of

²⁶ Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

asceticism changed and influenced the way Christians conceived of themselves. And as Krueger aptly notes, hagiography develops as a result and cause of this evolving concept. This suggestion is important for my own argument: that the Egyptian desert becomes a borderland space pregnant with signification and thus particularly useful for writers in the construction of the self and identity.

As markers of identity, gender and sexuality have drawn much attention to the study of Christian hagiography, particularly to the role of women and the function of gender within this genre of literature.³⁰ And as for the so-called harlot saints, tropes of redemption and conversion appear to some historians to be the main purpose of these narratives.³¹ Because some earlier work has taken a rather static view of the gender of sanctity within hagiographical texts, I will follow the leads of Elizabeth Clark, Virginia Burrus, David Brakke, and once again Derek Krueger, in showing how the elements of hagiography are such that the genre shifts the “categories of male and female under the influence of asceticism”³² rendering the boundaries of gender and sexuality less rigid. In this way I will also rely heavily on Burrus’s important countererotic and queer readings of ancient hagiography. As she has suggested, hagiography is

a historical product, a queer, late version of the ancient novel, emerging at the intersections of romance with biography, historiography, panegyric, martyrology—[with] its persistent subversions of genre, its promiscuous borrowings, its polyphonous multiplication of contesting voices, its subtle and

³⁰ For example, Elizabeth Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, Studies in Women and Religion (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), Elena Giannarelli, “Women and Miracles in Christian Biography (IVth-Vth Centuries),” *Studia Patristica* 25 (1993): 376-380, Lynda Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), John Kitchen, *Saints’ Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Virginia Burrus, “*Begotten Not Made*”: *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), and David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³¹ See Coon, *Sacred Fictions* and Benedicta Ward, *The Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Cistercian Publication, 1987).

³² Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, 191.

ever-shifting resistances within power, its layered remappings of place and replottings of time, its repeated traversals of the boundaries of history and fiction, truth and lies, the realms of the sacred and profane.³³

This description of Christian hagiography—in particular its characteristic “layered remappings of place and replottings of time”—is one that invites the spatial reading that I am suggesting and will return to below.

In her translation, introduction, and commentary to the *Life of Melania the Younger*, Elizabeth Clark attempts to situate the text within a genre—or, at the very least suggest the literary influences and precursors to Christian hagiography.³⁴ Clark argues that Christian hagiography is innovative in its divergence from narrating solely the lives of men. However, describing the lives of early Christian women, hagiography had to overcome some gendered barriers:

Adapting the biographical format to the lives of women proved problematic...the essentially private nature of most women’s lives in antiquity and the virtues thought appropriate to their condition, such as obedient devotion to a husband, were not suited to female martyrs and ascetics. Although the *Vitae* of early Christian women stress their overcoming of femaleness and subsequent incorporation into a world of “maleness,” it is still dubious whether the classical *bioi* furnished any fitting models for these *Lives*.³⁵

Instead of looking to biographies as a genre that hagiographies emulate, Clark suggests that the ancient novels, or “Hellenistic romances,” with their narratives about heroic women, are a far better source for hagiographies about women. Still, Clark contends that to attempt to find a singular source for ancient hagiography would be a foolish endeavor. Instead it is better to see the genre as participating in the literary milieu of the late ancient Mediterranean. The *Lives* of women are particularly important because

³³ Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 18.

³⁴ Clark, *The Life of Melania the Younger*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

according to Clark they assist in suggesting the variety of genres on which hagiography is based. More importantly Clark's suggestion regarding the novelty of biographies based on women, anticipates later work that sees the changing concept of the self and a concomitant understanding of gender as equally mutable.

In *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography*, Burrus argues that ancient hagiography has the potential to construct a Christian subject that is constantly in flux. Furthermore, her reading suggests that in these texts, eroticism and desire are freed “from the constraining and often violently oppressive structures of familial, civic, and imperial domination.”³⁶ Burrus illuminates the consistent disruption of hierarchies of power, and gender, rendering a queer subject that is integral to the description of desert asceticism. Describing the complex relationship between the hagiographer and his subject, Burrus gives us an understanding of Christian identity in late antiquity that subverts static notions of gender and sexuality vis-à-vis the hagiographer's narrative. She juxtaposes the master-disciple relationship with the author-subject relationship and then further triangulates them with the relationship between the saint and Christ in order to elaborate a homosocial pattern in the hagiographies of male saints. Furthermore, she suggests that the relationship between male authors and their female subjects in the hagiographies of holy women articulate an “asymmetrical relation of power,” which serves to further complicate and render the notion of gender as unfixed.³⁷ Her reading furthers our understanding of gender as ambiguously articulated in the *Lives* of saints. Burrus gives us a complex web of imbricated meanings found in hagiography that

³⁶ Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints*, 161.

³⁷ Ibid.

include queerness, sadomasochism, and seduction—all of which suggest how gender is exceeded in these texts.

Similarly, David Brakke also argues for the ambiguity of gender found in the hagiographies of late antiquity. He suggests that the monastic life in the later Roman Empire often prompted questions of weakness and proper masculinity because of the monk's choice to opt out of traditional Roman life—the brand of civic and family life noted by Burrus above. Because of this choice, “*The Life of Antony* can be read as shoring up the monk's ambiguous masculinity by presenting the monastic life as a ‘particular, meticulously cultivated version of manhood,’ in which Antony's body transcends the porous flux of feminized materiality.”³⁸ According to Brakke, antagonistic female figures in hagiographies present in the male saint a Christianized form of masculinity that is contrasted with their appearance in the text. Brakke is clear to remark that “monastic literature did not equate the demonic and the feminine; rather gendered imagery, especially visual, provided a variety of perspectives from which to view the monk and his diabolical enemies.”³⁹

In his *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*, Brakke looks closer at Christian hagiography in order to expose the complex web of meanings these particular texts attribute to gender and sexuality. He highlights the materiality of bodily existence in hagiographies which allude to a transcendence of gender. In particular, Brakke brings together the *Life of Antony* and the *Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Synclitica*—another intertextual hagiography that borrows from the *Life of Antony*—and argues that in them readers can glean the

³⁸ Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 182-183. Brakke quotes Burrus, “*Begotten, Not Made*,” 68-78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

construction of Christian identity.⁴⁰ Like Burrus, Brakke understands the flexibility of the gendered identities within the corpus of texts he examines. He suggests that gender exceeds corporeality. Because of this, the subjects of these *Lives* are gendered as masculine regardless of their bodily forms. The materiality of their bodies becomes inconsequential in determining their genders even as it remains paramount to the ascetic existence. It is, according to Brakke, in between the exteriority of bodiliness and the interiority of “nature” that the demonic functions in hagiographical literature.⁴¹ In this dualistic rendering of form and nature (the terms used in the *Life of Synclitica* to signal the exterior versus the interior) Brakke finds any static notions of gender to be far more precarious in hagiography. Furthermore, gender is dislocated from the materiality of embodiment and instead placed in the interiority of one’s soul.

Understanding the role of Christian hagiography in the elaboration of gender for some Christian authors in late antiquity is made even more evident when a spatial reading is applied to particular texts. By considering the ways in which the desert is figured not simply as ascetic space, but as gendered space, we can see more fully some key features of the late ancient imagination. For example, in the *Life of Mary of Egypt*, the gender and sexuality of the saint become its most salient features not only because the saint is figured as female, but also because her gender and her sexuality—via their juxtaposition alongside one of the most famous female figures in Christian history, the Virgin Mary—are the marks by which the saint is identified. And, all of this is articulated through the rendering of sacred spaces within the text.

⁴⁰ For Brakke this identity is the Christian monk.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

Building on the work of these and other scholars, I will argue that if hagiography is indeed a literary mode of identity production, then the *Lives* of Antony, Paul, and Mary of Egypt construct the saintly life as one of constant flux and negotiation—not unlike the indeterminate and shifting desert space they inhabit. Burrus has already hinted at this co-constitutive mimesis by describing Mary of Egypt as being “as vast—and as uncompromisingly elemental in her passions—as the desert itself.”⁴² This provocative suggestion is important because it hints at the very intimate relationship between space and identity.

Space and Identity

Peter Brown has described Antony as “the hero of the *Panerémos*, of the Deep Desert, the Outer Space of the ascetic world.” He goes on to remark that, “the stark boundary between the rich land of the Nile Delta and the rolling dunes of dead sand... had only to be crossed to register, with equal clarity, a *new departure* in ascetic piety for many other Egyptian Christians.”⁴³ As noted above, Brown’s comments seemingly allude to the “real” space of the Egyptian desert; yet they also signal the power of the literary imagination to construct space and identity as inextricably bound. Before Brown, Antoine Guillaumont considered desert space and its use by Christian writers and thinkers for the production of a literary image of desert asceticism.⁴⁴ He has shown how the desert allowed for the imaginative work of creating a place for the Christian ascetic to recede from society in the search for the holiest ways of living. He further notes an

⁴² Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints*, 147.

⁴³ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 214-15, emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ Antoine Guillaumont, “La conception du désert chez les moines d’Egypte,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 188 (1975): 3-21.

ambivalence regarding the desert as a space. He writes, “Comme bien d’autres—ainsi celle des ténèbres, de la nuit—, la notion de “desert,” dans l’histoire de la spiritualité, est ambivalente. Cela apparaît nettement déjà dans la Bible, l’Ancien Testament.”⁴⁵

Guillaumont rightly suggests that the imagined desert was one that simultaneously offered the Christian ascetic a space of solitude in which to withdraw and also a space filled with the chaos of demons, nonhuman creatures, and other ascetics serving as impediments to any sense of solitude. The ambivalence of space in Guillaumont’s rendering—based on biblical motifs—allows for a spatial reading that is open and productive of Christian identity.

Similarly, according to Goehring, “Grounded in the ecological reality of the Egyptian desert and the experiences of actual individuals, the myth of the desert emerged in the writings of the Christian authors who told the stories of the desert saints. They fashioned, whether consciously or unconsciously, a spiritual landscape that transcended the everyday realities of desert life.”⁴⁶ He goes on to say, “The saints who populated the landscape came to embody the Christian theme of alienation from the world by reversing the classical conceptions of city and desert.”⁴⁷ What Goehring and Guillaumont have signaled is a need to reinterpret the function of the desert in late ancient Christian hagiography—its importance, its ambivalence, and its role in determining the desert ascetic. By arguing for the co-production of saint and desert, I will demonstrate that Christian hagiography establishes the imagined Egyptian desert not only as a sacred space, but one that informs the identity of Christian sainthood.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁶ James Goehring, “The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert,” in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, eds., Dale Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 137.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 137.

The sacrality of space has been an important issue in the work of Robert Markus.⁴⁸ Markus is most interested in why there was a difference between pre- and post-Constantinian attitudes toward the sacrality of space. In conversation with Jonathan Z. Smith's *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Markus argues that the fourth century engendered a change in Christian attitudes toward sacred space. According to Markus, the concept of sacred time had been established early in the Christian tradition. Sacred space, however, was another matter. Christianity established itself as a religion "highly inhospitable to the idea of 'holy places.'" ⁴⁹ Markus argues that Eusebius is an excellent example of shifts in attitudes toward space in the fourth-century.

In Eusebius's view, place had been important to Jews and pagans; a spiritual religion such as Christianity had no room for physical holy places. If there is a holy city now, it can only be the heavenly Jerusalem. Eusebius could not quite keep up this theological conservatism in the face of Constantine's enthusiasm for the holiness of the holy places in Palestine which he adorned with his grand churches.⁵⁰

Therefore, after the imperial patronage of Christianity, Christians found themselves in a peculiar situation—trying to define "their identity, their sense of being the heirs of their persecuted ancestors, in historical terms."⁵¹ The proliferation of martyr cults with their correlative temples and shrines in the fourth century contributed to a sense of sacred space intrinsically tied to sacred time (history) and Christian identity.

While hagiography is not amongst the body of ancient literature Markus examines, his observation of a "clear shift in the fourth century towards the "locative,""⁵²

⁴⁸ Robert Markus, "How on Earth Could Places Become Holy?: Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places," in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 257-271. See also: Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁴⁹ Markus, "How on Earth Could Places Become Holy?," 259.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 264-65.

is important for my understanding of hagiography in late antiquity. As scholars before me have demonstrated, hagiography indeed emerges as a genre divergent from biography and history—borrowing from each of them as well as from the ancient romances. If we take the *Life of Antony*—or even, as Derek Krueger suggests, the generation of texts written after it and based on it⁵³—as the earliest products of this emergence, then Markus’s argument for a shift toward the locative in the fourth century suggests that it is simultaneous and related to the emergence of hagiography. That these two phenomena occur simultaneously is no coincidence. At least in as much as a turn toward the spatial can be perceived in the building projects of Constantine, the shrines of the martyrs, and the historical narrative of Eusebius, I will show that we can also perceive a turn to the spatial in the texts of hagiographers—and that this turn is intrinsically tied, as Markus suggests, to an attempt to determine Christian identity.

If Jerome’s introduction in his *Life of Paul the Hermit* is any indication, transitions from a Christian-as-martyr identity to a Christian-as-desert ascetic identity were on the minds of late ancient authors.⁵⁴ The wild, undetermined space of the desert was open and accessible enough to the hagiographer’s imagination to determine desert space as sacred space. This of course could only be made possible by the presence of the Christian ascetic.

The Egyptian Desert as a *Frontera*: Methodolgy

In order to understand the Egyptian desert of late antiquity as a textual site capable of producing the desert saint while simultaneously being a product of it, I will

⁵³ Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, 195-96.

⁵⁴ Jerome’s *Life of Paul* begins with two martyrdom accounts.

draw on discussions of space that have coalesced around heterogeneous scholarship sometimes known as “space theory.” Edward Soja has detailed the genealogy of this discipline in his *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*.⁵⁵ The diversity of scholars and the variety of their backgrounds, training, and methodologies characterizes the current state of “space theory” scholarship. Previously, however, space theories were relegated to the works of geographers not attuned (according to Soja) to the possibilities of space beyond its dualistic interpretations as either perceived *or* conceived space—“firstspace” and “secondspace” respectively. Soja explains, “In... Firstspatial analysis, human spatiality continues to be defined by and in its material configurations, but explanation shifts away from these surface plottings to an inquiry into how they are being produced.” On the other end of the spectrum:

Secondspace is the interpretive locale of the creative artist and artful architect, visually or literally re-presenting the world in the image of their subjective imaginaries; the utopian urbanist seeking social and spatial justice through the application of better ideas, good intentions, and improved social learning; the philosophical geographer contemplating the world through the visionary power of scientific epistemologies or the Kantian envisioning of geography as way of thinking or the more imaginative “poetics” of space; the spatial semiologist reconstituting Secondspace as “Symbolic” space, a world of rationally interpretable signification; the design theorist seeking the meanings of spatial form in abstract mental concepts. Also located here are the grand debates about the “essence” of space, whether it is “absolute” or “relative” and “relational,” abstract or concrete, a way of thinking or a material reality.⁵⁶

Seondspace hints at the imaginative possibilities of space, but Soja shows how this too is problematic when “the imagined geography tends to become the ‘real’ geography, with the image or representation coming to define and order the reality.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Soja, *Thirdspace*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

Soja's answer to these dualistic interpretations of *either* perceived *or* conceived space is his "thirthing-as-Othering" approach to space. Defining thirdspace, Soja writes,

In the late 1960's, in the midst of an urban or, looking back, a more generally spatial crisis spreading all over the world, an-Other form of spatial awareness began to emerge. I have chosen to call this new awareness Thirdspace and to initiate its evolving definition by describing it as a product of a 'thirthing' of the spatial imagination, the creation of another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning. Simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...), the exploration of Thirdspace can be described and inscribed in journeys to 'real-and-imagined'...places.⁵⁸

He bases this theory on the works of prior spatial thinkers—most notably Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*,—originally published in 1974 as *La production de l'espace* and translated into English in 1991.⁵⁹ While Lefebvre is Soja's primary interlocutor, he also notes Michel Foucault's work on heterotopologies and heterotopias as undergirding his own spatial reasoning.⁶⁰ Soja notes the vast differences between Lefebvre and Foucault (primarily the political, and social implications of their work), but argues that each was similarly anchoring his thought into a reconfiguration of space that had until then not been explicated—what Soja suggests is thirdspace. Thirdspace is another option to the traditional conceptions of space that Soja calls firstspace and secondspace; real space and imagined spaces, accordingly. Soja picks up thirdspace from its use by postcolonial and cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha. Bhabha uses thirdspace as a way to theorize his own concept of hybridity:

But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space'

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," in *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22-27.

which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are in adequately understood through conceived wisdom.⁶¹

Thirdspace is a hybridized concept of the real and imagined but taken and understood on its own as something new, different, and emergent—not simply as a combination of firstspace and secondspace. According to Soja:

Everything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history... This all-inclusive simultaneity opens up endless worlds to explore and, at the same time, presents daunting challenges. Any attempt to capture this all-encompassing space in words and texts, for example, invokes an immediate sense of impossibility, a despair that the sequentiality of language and writing, of the narrative form and history-telling, can never do more than scratch the surface of Thirdspace's extraordinary simultaneities.⁶²

Daunting as it may be, I argue that writers in late antiquity attempted to capture the sense of the real and imagined in their narratives of holy people and sacred spaces. Helpful as Soja's concept of thirdspace is to my understanding of desert space in late ancient hagiography, it is still Anzaldúa's *frontera* (borderlands) that more closely resonates with the "thirdness" and "otherness" of the Egyptian desert.

Soja notes that other thinkers have problematized the static notion of space as either perceived or conceived. Contributing to a proliferation in new conceptions of space, writers and thinkers such as Adrienne Rich, Doreen Massey, Donna Haraway, bell hooks, as well as Anzaldúa, have each in their own way added to a growing body of literature which dissolves the dichotomy between firstspace and secondspace epistemologies. Each of these thinkers, from seemingly disparate starting points, comes

⁶¹ Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford ed., (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207-21.

⁶² Soja, *Thirdspace*, 57.

to articulate their space and their worldview in such a way as to contribute to the kind of thirding-as-Othering, or thirdspace, for which Soja argues—whether intentionally or not. In other words, for some of these writers, contributing to a growing discourse on “space theory” as such may or may not have been their primary purpose. But as with Foucault, spatial thinking was imbued in each of their respective works and as such has contributed to an understanding of space that diverges from the traditional bifurcated interpretations. Furthermore, Soja calls attention to this particular group of feminist thinkers because it is indeed a feminist interpretation of space that most readily explicates his own notions of thirdspace. Soja rightfully credits Anzaldúa’s insights and spatial thinking as a precursor to his own development of thirdspace. Furthermore, Anzaldúa’s “third country,” I suggest, offers us much greater purchase on thinking human subjectivity anew. While Soja gives readers a theoretical model for how to think spatially, Anzaldúa gives us the tools and methods for how to think theoretically. She does so by foregrounding her thought in both the real and imagined; the third country or borderland space. And while the “real” is equally important, this dissertation privileges the imagined possibilities of space because of a tendency to diminish this capacity, as I have already mentioned above. Lastly, and most importantly, Anzaldúa gives us space that is relational. Her *frontera*, unlike the thirdspaces of Soja and Bhabha, are explicitly relational. Borderlands are the spaces where two or more cultures meet and rub against each other and bleed into each other. The evocative and violent imagery of wounds and bleeding are potently suggestive throughout Anzaldúa’s work and are repeated often. The relational aspects of desert space, I argue, are similarly important to authors of hagiography in late antiquity.

Ana Louise Keating best captures the spatial thinking of Anzaldúa. She writes, “In Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa’s writings, ‘nepantla’—a Nahuatl term meaning ‘in-between space’—indicates temporal, spatial, psychic, and/or intellectual point(s) of liminality and potential transformation.”⁶³ Keating discusses the use of the ancient Aztec concept of *nepantla* by Anzaldúa in order to formulate Anzaldúa’s own spatial thinking. For Anzaldúa, *nepantla* was an apt metaphor for thinking of her own frontier existence and worldview. More important, it was Anzaldúa’s way to dissolve binaries and false dichotomies that lead to oppression, injustice, and violence. Keating explains,

During nepantla, individual and collective self-conceptions and worldviews are shattered. Apparently fixed categories—whether based on gender, ethnicity/‘race,’ sexuality, economic status, health, religion, or some combination of these elements and often others as well—begin eroding. Boundaries become more permeable, and begin to break down. This loosening of previously restrictive labels and beliefs, while intensely painful, can create shifts in consciousness and opportunities for change.⁶⁴

Keating situates Anzaldúa’s theories on space as enmeshed in her understanding of *nepantla* in order to highlight the important shift in Anzaldúa’s thought. Keating understands Anzaldúa’s use of *nepantla* as reflective of her “broad-ranging philosophical commitments.” She writes, “All too often, scholars focus so extensively on Anzaldúa’s identity-based interventions that we overlook other aspects of her career.”⁶⁵ Still, even as she developed her theories of *nepantla*—an extension of her *metiza*/borderlands theories—she continued to make strong correlations with space and subjectivity. Keating acknowledges this link in Anzaldúa’s work: “Some people who experience these nepantla states become what Anzaldúa calls ‘nepantleras’: mediators, ‘in-betweeners,’ ‘those who

⁶³ AnaLouise Keating, “Introduction: shifting worlds, una entrada,” in AnaLouise Keating, ed., *EntreMundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

facilitate passages between worlds.’ ‘Nepantlera’ is a word Anzaldúa coined to describe threshold people: those who live within and among multiple worlds, and develop what Anzaldúa calls...a ‘perspective from the cracks.’ ” *Nepantlera*, it seems to me, is an extension of the *mestiza*. It is one who has adopted the *metiza* consciousness for which Anzaldúa advocates and as such is able to operate from a different worldview. As Keating puts it,

Foregrounding these theories [those having to do with *nepantla*] also underscores Anzaldúa’s use of indigenous imagery, terminology, and beliefs. Although some scholars have read this turn toward the indigenous as escapism or nostalgia, I disagree. Indigenous Mexican philosophies and worldviews offer Anzaldúa epistemological tools for individual/collective self-definition, resistance, intervention, and creation.⁶⁶

Agreeing with Keating, I see how we can apply Anzaldúa’s thoughts on *nepantla/nepantlera* or *la frontera/mestizaje* to Christian hagiography from late antiquity as a useful tool for discerning the process of identity making.

Similar to Anzaldúa’s concept of *mestizaje*, some authors in late antiquity were concerned with fashioning a hybrid Christian subject. In order to do so these authors relied heavily on the image of the desert. But again, this image was only made potent by the simultaneous fashioning of the desert saint. Anzaldúa demonstrates that space and identity are not only mutually influenced by each other, but each also serve as a perspective on how to view the other.

Anzaldúa’s concept of “third country” anticipates Soja’s “Thirdspace,” and it is from Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* that this dissertation will take its cues, as noted above. Anzaldúa’s thought will prove particularly fruitful for understanding the relationships between spatial productions, literary imaginations, and identity formations.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5.

Since identity is multiple and excessive for Anzaldúa, the flowing uncontainability and abundance of water becomes its most apt metaphor. “Identity is a river—a process.”⁶⁷ The excess and excessiveness of *mestizaje* likewise pushes at the limits of race, gender, sexuality, and humanity. And yet, *mestizaje* (hybridity) is contained in and by its very formation. Thus, the U.S.-Mexican borderlands figure prominently in the forging of this distinctly *new mestizaje*. Borderlands are the intimate spaces of production where tensions, differences, and identities are made and negotiated. Anzaldúa’s definition of borderlands proves highly suggestive for my understanding of desert space. The description of the Egyptian desert in Christian hagiography can be understood in terms of psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands “where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.” One can see the importance of desert space in constructing the identity of the Christian ascetic.

Anzaldúa is quick to point out that *mestizaje* is not simply a biological creation but a socially and politically constructed identity violently produced in the “third country” that is the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. As Soja has commented, “Anzaldúa may be the leading spatial theoretician of the borderlands and *mestizaje*.”⁶⁸ She describes her physical location in the borderlands as a space which transcends the constraints and binaries of race, sexuality, and nation. On this basis, Anzaldúa claims to “have no country, my homeland casts me out,” yet recognizes that “all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races).”⁶⁹ This

⁶⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, “To(o) Queer the Writer: Loca, escritoria y chicana,” in Betsy Warland, ed., *Inversions: Writing by Dykes, Queers and Lesbians* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1991), 253.

⁶⁸ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 129.

⁶⁹ Soja, *Thirdspace*, quoting Anzaldúa, 129.

simultaneous rejection and appropriation of the spatial concepts of nation/homeland is intrinsically tied to Anzaldúa's queerness—and, I posit, to the queerness of desert saints. I use the term queer to describe more than Anzaldúa's personhood, but also her writing, her thinking, and perception of the world. Anzaldúa conceives of and uses the term “queer” as both more fluid and more expansive than a sexual category narrowly defined.⁷⁰ Her sense of the queer resonates with those of contemporary queer theorists such as David Halperin, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,⁷¹ and has even influenced others such as Emma Pérez,⁷² José Esteban Muñoz,⁷³ and Chela Sandoval.⁷⁴ While each of these thinkers imagines queer identity in multiple ways, Anzaldúa's is helpful for its intersectional approach and connection to space.⁷⁵ That is, queerness for Anzaldúa is a facet of multiple layers of human life and identity. It is a way of knowing, a way of reading, and a way of interacting in the world. And again, queerness is the closest she gets to an identity that is resistant to being pinned down and identified. The spatial and the spiritual are all wrapped up in what she conceives of as queer. In the foreword to *Cassell's Encyclopedia to Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit*, she writes, “Spiritual meztizaje involves the crossing of borders, incessant metamorphosis... In its disturbance of traditional boundaries of gender and desire and its narratives of

⁷⁰ Anzaldúa, “To(o) Queer the Writer.”

⁷¹ See in particular, David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and *How to do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

⁷² Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) and “Queering the Borderlands: The Challenge of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard,” in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 24:2/3 (2003): 122-131.

⁷³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

⁷⁴ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁷⁵ That is not to suggest that the other “queer theorists” do not have an equally intersectional approach. But Anzaldúa's spatial and religious imagery is especially apt for my purposes.

metamorphosis... Queer Spirit qualifies as a kind of spiritual *mestizaje*.⁷⁶ In Anzaldúa, like other contemporary queer theorists, gender and sexuality are destabilized from their normative roles in order to expose the social constructedness of their use and reuse. Furthermore, she gives us a queerness that not only subverts these normative understandings, but also transgresses other boundaries of human identity. Gender, desire, and other cultural and spiritual borders are crossed in order to render a queer subject for Anzaldúa. And it is, of course, a subject produced in, by, and with relation to conceived space—to borderlands.

Anzaldúa's work is not unproblematic, however. *Borderlands/La Frontera* has been critiqued by Chicana/o and non-Chicana/o readers alike for its overly romanticized concept of the *mestiza* consciousness, and also for its over-essentialization of indigenous cultures at the expense of those very same people.⁷⁷ I have already noted above Keating's response to some of this criticism, but I will explicate what undergirds much of the critique of her work. For example, Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano notes "Primary among... concerns are what are seen as the text's essentializing tendencies, most notably in the reference to 'the Indian woman' and the privileging of the pre-Columbian deity Coatlicue, which obscures the plight of present day Native women in the Americas."⁷⁸ While it is true that Anzaldúa's tendency to wax sentimental about an indigenous past can be contextualized in the spirit of a Chicana/o movement, something about which her supporters have argued, a blind spot in her work remains her continued romanticized historical rendering of an indigenous past that elides the reality of an indigenous present.

⁷⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, "Foreword to Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit," *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, AnaLouise Keating ed., (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 229-31.

⁷⁷ See for example the work of Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, "Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*: Cultural Studies, 'Difference,' and the Non-Unitary Subject" in *Cultural Critique* 28 (1994): 5-28.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

Still, it is important to note the primacy with which Anzaldúa's theories laid out in *Borderlands/La Frontera* often obscure the trajectory of her own thought and later writings. It is for this very reason that AnaLouise Keating collected Anzaldúa's works into a volume, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. Keating writes, "Anzaldúa's post-*Borderlands* writings expand these concepts and others in provocative ways. Thus, for example, her later theories transform the Borderlands into nepantla, new mestiza into nepantleras and nos/otras, and mestiza consciousness into conocimiento."⁷⁹ Keating details the trajectory of Anzaldúa's thought in her introduction to this volume and again problematizes some of her work—in particular, the work she has grouped chronologically as Anzaldúa's "middle writings." Keating raises some of the aforementioned critiques having to do with overly romantic notions of "global citizenry," on one end of the spectrum, or the ironically rigid monolithic categories of identity on the other.

Yarbro-Bejarano also explains what's at issue for some critics. "The point is not to deny the explanatory power of Anzaldúa's model, but to consider the expense of generalizing moves that deracinate the psychic 'borderlands' and 'mestiza' consciousness from the United States/Mexican border and the racial miscegenation accompanying the colonization of the Americas that further serve as the material reality for Anzaldúa's 'theory in the flesh.'"⁸⁰ Yarbro-Bejarano suggests other modes of interpretation, divergent from this tendency to read Anzaldúa in this way. Still, the trajectory of Anzaldúa's thought is enlightening for readers of her work. The "later writings" shed light on her earlier work, not rendering them less problematic, but at the very least

⁷⁹ Keating, *Anzaldúa Reader*, 10.

⁸⁰ Yarbro-Bejarano, "Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*," 8.

indicating an intertextual relationship with other writers and thinkers and therefore suggesting Anzaldúa's participation in discourses centered on identity and resistance.

It would seem, then, that Anzaldúa's later work would be more meaningful for my use as an interpretive tool. She does, as Keating states, develop her spatial thinking to appropriate the nahuatl concepts of time and space. And certainly *nepantla* has some resonances with what I am attempting to suggest as the Egyptian desert for late ancient writers. Still I, like the many others Keating mentions in the introduction to the *Reader*, am seduced by the earlier concepts in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. It is in this text that I see spatial concepts that resonate most clearly with those found in the hagiographies I will examine more closely below.

With Anzaldúa in mind, I will argue that writers described ascetics in the fourth- and fifth-century Egyptian desert in similar terms as her description of *mestizaje* (a mixture, or hybrid identity). Christian asceticism, like *mestizaje*, is described in terms of a mixture—a complex identity emerging out of the competing discourses of identity. Thus, similar again to Anzaldúa's *mestizaje*, the relationships between power, dominance, and selfhood are played out in the literary imaginations of several authors.

Building on the scholarship on Christian hagiography, I begin by understanding the genre as one that is emerging in the later fourth century and distinguishing itself from the biographies and histories that preceded it. Its inclusion of holy women as subjects suggests to us the diverse milieu of which hagiography is a product and producer. Furthermore, the simultaneously emerging trend in the fourth century of a turn to sacred space is helpful for understanding the foreground of the literary imagination. Considering the importance of space to Christian writers in late antiquity in this way, will point us

toward an unresolvable—yet perhaps productive—tension within the hagiographies. What arises in my reading of these texts is the seeming intent to construct Christian identity—more specifically, a desert ascetic identity. And yet, what I will argue is that these authors conceived of a desert space that functioned as a place of possibility, open to fluidity and malleability and instead produced a Christian ascetic who resists identity. In order to elucidate this resistance, I will focus on a three particular themes—one for each text; community, animal life, and eroticism. By homing in on the description of these themes in the texts, I will maintain that the desert is an imagined space that simultaneously constructs while being constructed. Ultimately we are left with spaces of possibility in which queer renderings of Christian saintliness are perceived. The description of desert space demonstrates the tension between our desire as readers to identify and the text’s refusal to allow identification.

Using Anzaldúa as the main interlocutor with whom to tell a history of Christian late antiquity gives me a fresh approach to this field of study. I make no attempts to nicely fit or “map” her spatial theories directly onto the fourth-, fifth-, and seventh-century texts I look at below. To do so would not only be anachronistic but would make me guilty of falling into the trap that Anzaldúa’s critics suggest she has unwittingly set up. “If every reader who identifies with the border-crossing experience described by Anzaldúa’s text sees her/himself as a ‘New *mestiza*,’ what is lost in terms of the erasure of difference and specificity?”⁸¹ Yarbrow-Bejarano offers an important retort to this critique of *Borderlands*. She writes: “Other readings are possible that resist the impulse to read the text as one looks in a mirror... A useful strategy in teaching or reading *Borderlands* is to locate both reader *and* text: the reader vis-à-vis plural centers and

⁸¹ Ibid., 8.

margins, and the text within traditions of theorizing multiply embodied subjectivities by women of color.”⁸² Not wanting to risk erasing difference and specificity, what I hope to offer instead is a fresh approach to considering the literary description of the desert in Christian hagiography. I interpret Anzaldúa’s theories of *mestizaje* to encompass a complex range of possibilities via her notions of hybridity. And it is through this complexity that one is able to home in on the particularities of difference. In this way, I am leaning into the imagined sense of space even as I recognize that borderland space is defined by its “thirdness,” or otherness, which evokes both the real and imagined. I make this move intentionally because other studies have in the past leaned into the opposite, that is, the real, locateable, landscape of the desert.

⁸² Ibid., 8.

CHAPTER 2

TIERRA NATAL: ATHANASIOUS'S DESERT AS MESTIZA HOMELAND

As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

In Athanasius's *Life of Antony* the hero of the text moves away from the polis and in the end becomes something new. Athanasius's narrative is one in which the main character pursues a life detached from a particular space—his homeland, the city of Alexandria. Yet, Athanasius describes the Egyptian desert as a space with the potential also to be a homeland and therefore it possesses the power to give birth to a new identity: that of the desert ascetic. Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa describes her own identity in contrast to the homeland and countries that reject her. However, as the epigraph above indicates, she conceives of other spaces as available to her as alternate homelands. In part, this concept is grounded in the idea of Aztlán—the mythical homeland of the ancient Aztec tribes. I will say more about Aztlán below as I detail how both Athanasius and Anzaldúa describe a subject in relation to the spaces that they inhabit physically, psychically, and/or, emotionally.

Although rejection is paramount to these narratives of displacement and placelessness, a new homeland is equally important. As I will demonstrate below, new

homelands, or as for Anzaldúa, *el retorno* (a return) home, is less about a return to origins, and much more about the creation of something entirely new; a new family, a new home, a new self. And each of these is intentionally transgressive of the limits and boundaries placed on them.

In the opening lines of his *Life of Antony* Athanasius addresses neophyte ascetics stating, “You have entered on a fine contest with the monks in Egypt, intending as you do to measure up to or even to surpass them in your discipline of virtue” (*Life of Antony*, Proem).⁸³ Thus he casts Egypt (and implicitly its desert) as a main element in the drama yet to unfold. The space of Egypt’s desert will determine the measure of all monks everywhere. In this chapter I demonstrate how late ancient Christian hagiography constructs the space of Egypt’s desert not merely as a sacred space, but also as a conceptual space for considering the question of Christian identity. By thinking of the desert as a homeland and its human inhabitants as a queer family, the resonances with Anzaldúa will become clear. The *Life of Antony* lays the foundation for conceiving of Egypt’s desert space in terms of its ability to give birth to something new, something different. Furthermore, as Athanasius sets up the contest into which the monks have entered, we soon see that the contest does not make competitors out of the Christian ascetics who surround Antony throughout the text, but instead that the competition has created a community of desert monks—a queer community that can be perceived as familial. What Anzaldúa calls her *tierra natal*, or homeland, is akin to the space Athanasius creates for his desert ascetic to call his home.

⁸³ I am following a translation from the Greek *Life of Antony* by Robert C. Gregg, trans., *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980).

In order to demonstrate this construction of desert space in Athanasius's text I will begin by describing the city and life Antony leaves behind. I suggest Athanasius's goals of describing the emergence of a desert ascetic identity are wholly reliant on his spatial construction of the Egyptian desert. The desert comes into stark relief when we are able to understand what exactly it is Antony leaves behind. In the second part of the chapter, I will describe the "demonic space" of Athanasius's desert in order to suggest further that the construction of Christian identity relies on late ancient demonology and the triangulated relationship between Christian ascetics, demons, and their shared desert space. In conclusion, I return to a description of Antony's final home in the Egyptian desert in order to demonstrate the dissonant descriptions of space that suggest a metaphoric value in constructing the similarly dissonant desert *mestiza*—the Christian ascetic. This final space for the aging ascetic will be the catalyst for a return home. The *retorno* I describe in terms of Athanasian and Anzaldúan cosmologies. What becomes clear is that Athanasius has imagined a desert abundantly populated by demons, beasts, and other ascetics. These figures are important in the narrative as they are a community and new family which give way to the emerging desert *mestiza* subject by illustrating their relational positioning to the saint in the text. Thus, the concept of desert space as isolating and empty is shown in this hagiography of the first desert saint to be a foil for Athanasius's imagined desert teeming with spiritual and human life.

The Life of Antony

The *Life of Antony* is one of the most influential texts in the history of Christian asceticism. In the introduction to his English translation, Robert Gregg has considered the

appeal of the text, suggesting that “If we seek a common denominator in its popularity, it may be possible to point to the successful combination of two indispensable elements of any good tale. The *Vita Antonii* featured a larger-than-life central character, and a strange and exotic setting for his exploits.”⁸⁴ Athanasius’s hagiography ranges in purpose from Christian apologetics, to an ascetic and pedagogical manual, or even a defense of Nicene orthodoxy masked as saintly biography.⁸⁵ Indeed Athanasius’s other writings do depict an author embroiled in the cultural, theological, and dogmatic controversies of his day.⁸⁶ Unlike his other writings, however, the *Life of Antony* is much more than Christian polemics. By detailing the life of a revered and respected ascetic, it not only built on the classical genre of biography, but had a lasting influence on later Christian hagiographers and thinkers, from Jerome to Augustine.⁸⁷ Whatever its purposes, the reception of the *Life of Antony* indicates its importance and place in the history of Christian asceticism as a primary text for the growing movement.⁸⁸

Setting the Stage

The desert, as Athanasius describes it, is both a *real* and an *imagined* space—even better, perhaps, a *Thirdspace* or a *third country*. As we have seen, “third country” is

⁸⁴ Gregg, *Athanasius*, 3-4.

⁸⁵ For example, see David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 24, Philip Rousseau, “Antony as Teacher in the Greek Life,” in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, eds. Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2000), 89-109, and Gregg, introduction.

⁸⁶ For example, *Against the Pagans, On the Incarnation of the Word, Apology to Emperor Constantius, and Defense of the Nicene Council*, to name only a very few.

⁸⁷ Not only has the influence of the Life been seen in the writings of Jerome and Augustine, but scholars have shown its use of the *Life of Pythagoras*, *Life of Apollinios*, *Life of Plotinus*, and *Life of King Agesilaus* to be evident in Athanasius’s hagiography. See Samuel Rubenson, “Antony and Pythagoras: A Reappraisal of the Appropriation of Classical Biography in Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii*,” in *Beyond Reception: Mutual Influences between Antique Religions, Judaism, and Early Christianity*, David Brakke, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and Jörg Ulrich eds., *Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2006), 191-208.

⁸⁸ See Gregg, *Athanasius*, introduction.

Gloria Anzaldúa's description for what she more frequently dubs the "borderlands."⁸⁹ It is a space that is closely correlated with a particular kind of subjectivity or "consciousness":

At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly "crossing over," [the] mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an "alien" consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands.⁹⁰

Like Anzaldúa's borderlands, Athanasius's desert space gives birth to *mestizaje* and likewise to "mestiza consciousness," and in this way his construction of the Egyptian desert is fundamental to his construction of the *new mestiza*, or, the *new* Christian ascetic—the desert ascetic. According to Anzaldúa, *mestiza* consciousness is a way of thinking, a way of perceiving the world and communicating with and within it. *Mestiza* consciousness diverges from other modes of consciousness by undoing dualities and binaries and instead employing an open, pluralistic approach to understanding human life and in particular human identity. As Richard Miles informs us, "there is no unitary 'late antique' identity, just as there is no single 'late antique' culture in which these identities are created. Identity and culture are both in a constant state of flux and development."⁹¹ Taking the notion that late antique culture and identity are in a constant state of flux and development, Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness and its relationship to space can guide our consideration of the development of ascetic identity in late antiquity.

⁸⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa determines borderlands as a third country. She writes, "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and it bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture." Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 25.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹¹ Richard Miles, "Introduction: Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity," in Richard Miles, ed., *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge Press, 1999), 1-15.

For both Anzaldúa and Athanasius, *la frontera* (the borderlands) is an important feature in their narratives—one that assists in the production of *mestizaje*. *Mestizaje* bespeaks the hybridity—the ideological and cultural “cross-pollination”—and confluence of identities bound up within fourth-century Christian asceticism. In a post-Constantinian world, the struggle to make meaning of one’s identity can be perceived within Christian hagiography. Here I take my cue from the work of Robert Markus, in *The End of Ancient Christianity*, which considers the important question (among others) of “*Quid sit christianum esse?*”⁹² As the introduction to this work notes, part of Markus’s analysis includes an investigation into Christian concepts of space and how they relate to Christian identity. According to Markus, Christians sought to answer the question of Christian identity with some urgency due to “the rapid and far-reaching process of christianisation of Roman society which was reaching a climax.” Referring to the time span between the late fourth and mid-fifth centuries as a “time of dramatic change,” Markus argues for a markedly different concept of “Christian space” between the pre- and post-Constantinian eras. He writes, “The ‘Constantinian revolution’ not only forced Christianity to re-assess itself in relation to its own past. It also raised other, far-reaching, questions about the nature of the community and the communities that it considered itself to be, and about their interrelationships.”⁹³ Furthermore in his article, “How on Earth Could Places Become Holy? Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places,” he again argues that the imperial patronage of Christianity in the fourth century is a catalyst for the shift in the concept of Christian space as sacred space.⁹⁴ This is in no small part due to

⁹² Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁹⁴ Robert Markus, “How on Earth Could Places Become Holy? Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2:3 (1994): 257-271.

the massive building projects of Constantine but also, according to Markus, a coalescing of martyr cults and newer emerging Christian cults with their eyes set always on their historical pre-Constantinian past help to establish the importance of space in determining Christian identity.

In the *Life of Antony*, the role of space in creating Christian identity can be perceived. Athanasius constructs the space of the Egyptian desert as a borderland—a space generative of desert asceticism and generative of late ancient *mestizaje*. The desert outside of Alexandria becomes for Athanasius *la frontera* between heaven and earth.

At first glance the quote from Anzaldúa with which I introduce this chapter speaks to and about a very different cultural and historical moment than the world described by Athanasius in the *Life of Antony*. For example, Athanasius tells us that Antony was only about eighteen or twenty when his parents died and he was entrusted with the care of his sister. However, instead of caring for her in a way perhaps more recognizable to modern readers, Antony takes her to a convent and leaves her with “trusted virgins.” I will return to this point below, but before I do I want to back up in the text to the moment just before Antony decides to leave his sister and set out on his own.

Athanasius writes,

Six months had not passed since the death of his parents when, going to the Lord’s house as usual and gathering his thoughts, he considered while he walked how the apostles, forsaking everything, followed the Savior, and how in Acts some sold what they possessed and took the proceeds and placed them at the feet of the apostles for distribution among those in need (2).

Later Antony goes into church and hears the Gospel of Matthew (19:21) being read and he heeds its words by giving away the rest of all he had including his sister and his land

before he heads out on his own and “disciplined himself in isolation, not far from his own village.”(3)

What Athanasius details for us is a narrative of rejection. Antony rejects his home and his only remaining family. He rejects the dominant culture of familial and civic life in the later Roman Empire, whereas Anzaldúa’s words imply the dominant culture’s (“homeland’s”) rejection of her. Still, each of them resists the grounding of identity within particular social and familial groups and, furthermore, each points toward the option left to one who, whether by choice or by force, is detached from these networks of association that assist in the definition of self. The option left, according to Anzaldúa, is to create something new. The *Life of Antony* and its production of the desert ascetic likewise can be seen as Athanasius’s attempt to create something new. Anzaldúa further suggests that while her homeland rejects her, every country is hers because of her participation in the creation of a new culture, “a new value system with images and symbols that connect [all] to the planet,” and to each other. Both Anzaldúa and Athanasius’s Antony imagine that there is an “other” space, an “other” birthplace outside of the dominant culture/empire/nation/*ethnos* in which one can, paradoxically perhaps, determine an identity that remains unfixed and resistant to determinacy—an identity that resists identification.

David Brakke argues that through his demonology Athanasius creates a differentiation that is a monastic identity. He writes, “Throughout the *Life* Athanasius identifies...the enemies of the demons as not ‘monks,’ but simply ‘Christians,’ of whom the monks are the outstanding representatives. The demons attack ‘all Christians’ who

make progress in virtue, ‘but especially monks.’⁹⁵ According to Brakke, in Athanasius we can begin to see the distinction between ascetics and other Christians. And so the emergence of a new identity is perceivable.

In *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, Belden Lane has observed the connections between the habitation of a space, the habits and practices of a space’s inhabitants, and a way of knowing, and thus, of being.⁹⁶ There is, Lane notes, an “inescapable linkage between our ‘place’ and our way of conceiving the holy, between habitat and *habitus*, where one lives and how one practices a habit of being.”⁹⁷ Lane relies on Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of *habitus* in order to demonstrate the relationship between space and being. For Bourdieu, *habitus* is a way of being that relies on socialized memory. According to Lane, Christian ascetics depended on their own socialized memory of biblical typologies that identified the desert as a sacred space imbued with a particular spirituality. The first desert ascetics then established their own social memory by identifying themselves with the desert space and their daily life and practices in the desert. Lane’s observations suggest that elements in the *Life of Antony* showcase Athanasius’s goals of constructing the Egyptian desert as a borderland space constitutive of identity. Athanasius describes Antony and his fellow ascetics as relying on their memories of scriptures, but importantly he puts in Antony’s mouth a remark about the deficiency in using scripture alone. Antony warns his fellow monks that they must speak to each other and encourage each other. The *habitus* for Antony and his ascetic family is clearly a relational mode of being. In this way, Antony and the other inhabitants

⁹⁵ Brakke, *Demons*, 24.

⁹⁶ Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9-15.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

of the desert form the basis for a spatial awareness within Athanasius's hagiography that illustrates the interrelatedness between space and identity.

Space is determined by its inhabitants as well as by its elemental qualities. By focusing on Antony's journey and the inhabitants of the Egyptian desert he encounters along the way, Athanasius's spatial imagination becomes clearer. In the *Life of Antony* demons and other ascetics (or villagers)⁹⁸ help to construct the spatial imagery of Athanasius's desert. Antony is continuously defined against these other inhabitants. As he travels through the desert, his interactions with the desert's other inhabitants continuously define the space because of their inextricable connection to it.

Antony's journey begins with his turning away from a traditional Roman life and taking up an ascetic life in the monasteries located in close proximity to his village. When this space proves to have limitations for Antony's identity as a desert ascetic—his epistemic possibilities or his *mestiza* consciousness—he turns away from it as well. He experiments with a solitary life in a tomb located just outside his village and then eventually finds a solitary mountain retreat. This is where the most descriptive of Antony's transformations takes place. He discovers a new home in which he is (re)born and from which he is able to exhort and to exemplify the ascetic life. Finally, Antony again moves throughout the desert space and discovers what will be his final earthly dwelling. The first two stages involve Antony's turning away from something known and familial. The last two stages exemplify Antony's discovery of his homeland and birthplace—his *tierra natal*.

⁹⁸ Regarding the distinction between villagers and other ascetics; Athanasius seems to collapse these two into the same category. Therefore it is not always clear whether the villagers living on the outskirts of Alexandria are there pursuing an ascetic lifestyle like those described by Philo in his *On the Contemplative Life*, or for what other purposes they are not residing inside the city. What is clear is that among these villagers all or many are pursuing an ascetic lifestyle in community with other ascetics.

I am diverging here somewhat from Samuel Rubenson’s argument in, “Antony and Pythagoras.” Rubenson claims,

Antony’s three places of retreat, the house, the tomb and the well are traditionally interpreted as stages of progress in Antony’s life, the development of ever-increasing seclusion from the world. A closer look at the text does not support this! Except for the geographic location and the specific characterization of Antony’s struggle, they are each quite similar.⁹⁹

My argument throughout will be that each stage represents a different geographic location and an abundantly populated space, and each has been formative for the identity of the desert ascetic. Each location, although rendered as a “home” for Antony, is still different from the previous homes he inhabits. And it is this continuous making and breaking of home and family that reveals an identity-making narrative.

Breaking from the Source

Before detailing Antony’s first steps into the Egyptian desert, I want to consider what Athanasius’s Antony is turning away from. First, in his decision to take up the ascetic life and reside with other urban ascetics, he leaves behind family and home. Athanasius tells us, “He devoted himself from then on to the discipline rather than the household (αὐτὸς πρὸ τῆς οἰκίας ἐσχόλαζε λοιπὸν τῇ ἀσκήσει)” (3).¹⁰⁰ Antony’s movement into the desert is not simply a movement toward an ascetic lifestyle. It is of course that, but it is also his turning away from a traditional life and the social expectations of participating in family life—itsself a microcosm of Roman culture.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Samuel Rubenson, “Antony and Pythagoras,” 200.

¹⁰⁰ “οἰκίας” is translated here as *household* but could also be rendered as *family unit*, and in some instances simply as *family*.

¹⁰¹ For example, in Eva Marie Lassen’s study of the “The Roman Family: Ideal and Metaphor,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997), 103-20, she claims, “According to Roman tradition, the family was the heart of pagan society; it was the basis of society and its most important part. Despite great economic, political, and social changes taking

As an example of a precursor to the later patterns of desert asceticism and the development of new homelands and new families, I want to briefly introduce Philo of Alexandria's writings in which we see that family life and familial relationships are on a par with spatial terms such as homeland or father/motherland. In his *On the Contemplative Life* he writes about the philosophical/ascetic community of Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, claiming that:

When they have divested themselves of their possessions and have no longer aught to ensnare them they flee without a backward glance and leave their brothers, their children, their wives, their parents, the wide circle of their kinsfolk, the groups of friends around them, the fatherlands (πατρίδα) in which they were born and reared, since so strong is the attraction of familiarity.¹⁰²

Eva Marie Lassen has discussed the prevalence of metaphorical connections between familial relationships and the structures of Roman society as well as the potency of this symbolism in Roman culture. She writes:

Horace, the poet, was one of those who, many years before Augustus officially was called *Father of the Fatherland*, made use of this metaphorical connection between the father of the family and Augustus (Hor. Carm. I.2; I.12; III.24). Also in the religious cults Augustus broke down the barrier between himself, his family and the people...By way of representing his family as a state family, Augustus reinforced the image of himself as state leader and *father-figure*. During the Republic, the role of officials' wives and families as public figures was limited. Augustus rendered his wife and family visible to the public eye, and although the imperial family was tarnished by scandals he tried to represent its members as models for Roman wives, husbands, and children (emphasis mine).¹⁰³

Although Lassen works with writers from a much earlier period, the metaphorical language suggests the important idealism behind the Roman family as a model of and for Roman society, which persists for several centuries. Furthermore, it also betrays the important connection between family and the spatial conception of home. Thus the term

place during the Republic and Principate, this traditional view was largely maintained throughout the Classical period. A deeply rooted respect surrounded the family" (104).

¹⁰² Philo of Alexandria, *On the Contemplative Life*, 18.

¹⁰³ Lassen, "The Roman Family," 113.

homeland is representative of and represented by family—a network of individuals who share a common bond that is most often spatial and most always legal.

Still, Stephen Barton has argued that early Christian families adopted reconfigurations of the Roman *familia* based on the gospel stories which exhort followers of Jesus to relativize familial relationships by giving love of God and of “Christian family” precedence over the Roman ideal and tradition of *familia*.¹⁰⁴ Barton further claims that the Greco-Roman world was already predisposed to reconfigurations of “the family” by later Christians.¹⁰⁵ According to Barton, this reconfiguration on the part of Christians was neither surprising nor remarkable in its subordination of the Roman *familia*. Instead, it was in keeping with other budding philosophical and religious movements of the ancient Mediterranean.

The tension between Christian family and more “traditional” bonds of kinship in Roman society is made clear within a text such as the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*.¹⁰⁶ While familial metaphors and descriptions abound in this text, what is most evident is the choice that Perpetua, “a newly married woman of good family and upbringing” (2), makes to die in communion with her Christian family rather than yielding to the desperate pleas of her emotional father who asks her to renounce Christianity in order to save her life. But what could the kind of reconfiguration Barton alludes to mean for families in later antiquity? What about families in a post-

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Barton, “The Relativisation of Family Ties in Jewish and Graeco-Roman Traditions,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997), 81-100.

¹⁰⁵ For another excellent study of early Christian family life, see the collection of essays in David Balch and Carolyn Osiek, eds., *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), especially the essays by Dale Martin and Margaret Mitchell.

¹⁰⁶ W.H. Shewring, trans., *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (London: 1931).

Constantinian world? That is, what could be said about the relationality within an all-Christian family unit?

Kate Cooper's study of the family in later antiquity considers aspects of these questions.¹⁰⁷ Cooper suggests there is a continuation of this Christianizing reconfiguration of the family that coincides with political shifts in Roman bureaucracy: "Across the fourth and fifth centuries, the senate was brought more closely into the imperial *militia* through appointment to administrative posts; at the same time, as a result of contribution by distinguished persons, the imperial bureaucracy gained in standing... This brought with it, among other things, a change in the balance of power within Roman families."¹⁰⁸ Cooper goes on to explain how sons were able, because of their political/economic connections to important people of wealth, to gain some autonomy and power within the family unit and therefore the ability to make decisions for the benefit of the *familia*. Importantly for my purposes, Cooper suggests that Christianity, and in particular Christian asceticism, "contributed greatly to the development of a literature which affirmed that children could—and should—defy their parents in matters of conscience," and she goes on to claim that "one of the reasons ascetic literature found an enthusiastic audience beyond the numerically small community of ascetic practitioners may have been its repeated stress on the moral independence of youth."¹⁰⁹

Cooper relies on the *Acts of the Martyrs* and the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* in order to support her claims. Referring to her earlier work in *The Virgin and the Bride*:

¹⁰⁷ Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity,¹¹⁰ she suggests the “contribution of early hagiographical sources to this atmosphere of suspicion of authority.”¹¹¹ With this in mind I suggest that a closer look at the *Life of Antony* reveals a similar, even if slightly altered, model of the Christian *familia* that Cooper proposes. This point is important to my argument because it suggests that integral to the emerging ascetic identity is the break with what is familiar and expected (and furthermore that this break is difficult). To suggest otherwise, that is, to make the point that Christians from the second century onward already identified with a break from traditional notions of family life—and its corollary in Greco-Roman antiquity, civic life—is to miss an important aspect in the construction of identity for late ancient Christian ascetics. The break from the source, that is, civic and familial responsibility, must remain difficult and not yet normative, in the forging of the complex identity of the desert ascetic.

That break comes with some revision for Athanasius’s Antony. Athanasius informs us that Antony’s parents “were Christians [and therefore] he also was raised in a Christian manner” (1). He makes clear the importance of familial bonds and of home for Antony. When Antony was a child, he tells us, “he lived with his parents, cognizant of little else besides them and his home...All his yearning, as it has been written of Jacob, was for living, an unaffected person, in his home” (1). The reference to Jacob of the Genesis story recalls the difference between the twin brothers. Jacob’s love for family and home is contrasted with Esau who fled home often as a “man of the open country.”¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 56-62 and 66-67. See also Marilyn Nagy’s psychoanalytic theory for the reconfiguration (or in her terms, the “translocation”) of the family in late antiquity in “Translocation of Parental Images in Fourth-Century Ascetic Texts: Motifs and Techniques of Identity,” *Semeia* 58.2 (1992): 3-24.

¹¹¹ Cooper, *The Fall*, 28, fn. 84.

¹¹² Gen. 25:27.

Antony, like Jacob before him, is connected with his home and with his family; in both stories, “home” is emblematic of the spatial constructions for family.

As mentioned above, a seemingly dramatic event occurs for a boy so connected to his family and his home. At the age of “eighteen, possibly twenty,” his parents die and leave him and his sister orphans. This is the point at which Antony’s initial break from the source occurs. Athanasius tells us that he leaves his sister behind in the care of “well-known and trusted virgins (γνωρίμοις καὶ πισταῖς παρθένοις)” (3) and sets off into the desert. We know that Antony is inspired by a reading of the gospel to sell all of his possessions and give the money to the poor. But we are not told why he abandons his sister—his only remaining connection to his family. Later, when demons begin to attack Antony, they do so through memories of his family and feelings of familial responsibility, among other things: “First [the devil] attempted to lead him away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the bonds of kinship (ὑποβάλλων μνήμην τῶν κτημάτων, τῆς ἀδελφῆς τὴν κηδεμονίαν, τοῦ γένους τὴν οἰκειότητα)” (5). Athanasius uses this turning away from his sister, his family, and his native village, as Antony’s first step toward becoming an ascetic. The world Antony is fleeing is, in Athanasius’s understanding at least, the world of familial connections and responsibilities. That these connections are important and not merely the loose bonds of kinship no longer revered by a Christianized society, is only made more evident by Athanasius’s mention of them and their description as Antony’s first attacks. His sense of obligation and his own reverence for these bonds impede his asceticism. Athanasius further emphasizes the importance of Antony’s turning away—his flight from the world—by telling his readers that he “would not look back on things of his parents,

nor call his relatives to memory. All the desire and all the energy he possessed concerned the exertion of the discipline” (3). Furthermore, the community of virgins becomes an important space for Athanasius. His brief mention of it is part of his description of a scene in which Antony enters a church, hears the gospel, and then takes his sister and leaves her in the care of the chaste community. Just before he does this, however, he also gives away a significant amount of land: “three hundred fertile and very beautiful *arourae*” (2). While the descriptions of Antony giving away his land, and his sister are brief—almost to the point of insignificance—these are textual spaces and moments that remain a touchstone for the rest of the unfolding drama. As Antony walks away from his land and then his sister, “he devoted himself from then on to the discipline rather than the household.” As I have already mentioned, this break from dedication to the household is not an insignificant one.

Anzaldúa has commented on the necessity and the painfulness of familial abandonment in the service of “finding” oneself. She writes, “To this day I’m not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, *mi tierra, mi gente*, and all that picture stood for. I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me.”¹¹³ While the language of “intrinsic nature” is problematic when considering more recent theoretical work on identity, her point that for her leaving home allowed her to understand her subjectivity with more complexity, still remains. Anzaldúa’s definition of *home*, like that of the Greek οἰκίος, carries with it ideas of family, kinship, space, place, and obligation. Anzaldúa’s “*tierra*,” her earth, the land she possesses and which possesses her, is a homeland. It is reminiscent of Philo’s Therapeutae and Therapeutrides.

¹¹³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 38.

And although Athanasius does not use the term πατρίδος as Philo does, to describe what Antony leaves behind, his use of οικόσις persists with connotations of all that picture stood for. While breaking from the source—leaving behind one’s homeland, motherland—is an important first step in the making of the desert ascetic, as we shall see there are new homelands to be discovered. And again it is not merely the rejection of homeland that creates a subject available for transformation, but rather, the description and contrasts of spaces in hagiography allow for the construction of identity.

New Homelands, New Families

Peter Brown has written, “To flee ‘the world’ was to leave a precise social structure for an equally precise and...an equally social alternative.”¹¹⁴ Describing this social alternative in *‘Virgins of God’: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Susanna Elm has noted, “[A]scetic life in Egypt was characterized by an extraordinary degree of variety...there were three distinct categories: ascetic life within cities and towns, ascetic life in the isolation of the desert or the countryside, and an ascetic life ‘in between,’ in areas a little way beyond the boundaries of the village or town though not in the desert proper.”¹¹⁵ As Athanasius tells us, “Each of those [monks] wishing to give attention to his life disciplined himself in isolation, not far from his own village.” (3) Contrasting this with the further reaches of the “outer” desert that Antony will eventually inhabit, Athanasius is careful to inform us “there were not yet many monasteries in Egypt, and no monk knew at all the great desert (μακρὰν ἔρημον).” (3)

¹¹⁴ Brown, *Body and Society*, 217.

¹¹⁵ See Susana Elm, *‘Virgins of God’: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 331.

Further illustrating the variety within Christian asceticism, James Goehring, building (in part) on the work of Ewa Wipszycka's "Le monachisme égyptien et les villes,"¹¹⁶ not only describes the variety of ascetic lifestyles in the fourth and fifth centuries, but also further argues for the persistence and continuation of village or urban monasticism (vis-à-vis the establishment of Pachomian monasteries in Upper Egypt) which relied heavily on a mutually beneficial relationship with the polis.¹¹⁷ Prior to Goehring's work, Wipszycka sought to catalog the evidence for monastic life in close proximity to the polis (ascetic life in the "in between," to use Elm's terms) as a corrective to modern historiographic narratives in which "le monachisme égyptien est généralement considéré comme un phénomène rural : il serait né des besoins religieux propres aux paysans, aurait recruté ses adeptes principalement dans les villages, aurait fui les villes et se serait opposé à la culture dominante, liée à celles-ci."¹¹⁸ What Wipszycka, Elm, and Goehring have each made evident (as only a part of their respective studies) is that in fourth-century Egypt, desert asceticism emerges as something distinct from other forms of ascetic living. Furthermore, while a new Christian identity begins to emerge there is a simultaneous continuation of urban asceticism¹¹⁹ that becomes overshadowed in the literary sources.¹²⁰

Athanasius begins to describe Antony's first stage in becoming a desert *mestiza*. With rejection of one family comes the fashioning of another, it seems. Athanasius informs us that, as Antony began his life as an ascetic, residing just outside of his village,

¹¹⁶ James Goehring, "Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt," *The Harvard Theological Review* 89.3 (1996): 267-285.

¹¹⁷ Goehring uses the term "*oikumene*" which can have moralistic connotations of "civility" within populated space. I have chosen the more generic *polis* for an indication of city life in contrast to the *erémos*, desert life.

¹¹⁸ Ewa Wipszycka, "Le Monachisme Égyptien et les Villes," *Travaux et mémoires* 12 (1994): 1-44.

¹¹⁹ Goehring, "Withdrawing from the Desert," 268.

¹²⁰ Wipszycka, "Le Monachisme," especially 3-9 and Goehring, "Withdrawing from the Desert," 270.

“All those, then, who were from his village and those good people with whom he associated, seeing him living thus, used to call him ‘God-loved (θεοφιλή),’ and some even hailed him as ‘son (υιόν),’ and some ‘brother (ἀδελφόν).’” (5) By Athanasius’s rendering, Antony’s journey into the desert just outside his village coincides with a journey away from a traditional Roman idea of family and to a new notion of family, one in which familial terms like “son” and “brother” are bound up within a term such as “God-loved.” Here, one can begin to perceive that Antony’s journey is the discovery of both a new space and a new birthplace.

He proceeds by moving from village to village and as a result he has some interaction with the local villagers as well as other Christian ascetics. The villagers and ascetics seem to share a zeal for his pursuits. As Antony opts out of the traditional Roman ideas of family, he seemingly has become a part of a new family. While he may not wholly embrace this new family, choosing, for example, to live in solitude, he comes to rely on them and need something from them and they from him. Still, even as they come to form a new community, Antony, must leave again, continuously reminding us—step by step—that he is still rejecting and displacing himself from the space. He is not yet at home here. And so, he is constantly fleeing these new family members, just as he flees “the world,” even while he is simultaneously the recipient of their benevolent care, love, and teaching.

Antony’s first teacher in the ascetic discipline is a monk from a neighboring village living in solitude just outside of his village. Antony begins by emulating this neighbor, but Athanasius informs us of Antony’s eagerness for the discipline by telling his readers that if Antony learned about “some other zealous person anywhere, he

searched him out like the wise bee” (3). As we will later learn, Athanasius has (unknowingly of course) set up Jerome’s hagiography by depicting Antony as a disciple whose zeal and curiosity causes him to seek out his pedagogical masters of the discipline. In this account, however, it is Antony’s wisdom, not only his bee-like zeal, that motivates him to seek out these teachers. In this way, Athanasius continues to highlight the link he is creating between the journey into the depths of Egypt’s desert and the emergence of the identity of the desert ascetic. Led only by his own wisdom, he moves from one ascetic to another, from one village outpost to another—at each point learning from and then surpassing a master of the discipline. While it is his wisdom that leads him, ostensibly it is also his wisdom that is deepening, mimicking his deepening movements into the desert.¹²¹

Ever the obedient student, Antony learns the lessons of asceticism from his teachers while simultaneously committing to memory everything from scripture so that “in him the memory took the place of books.” With the lack of any formal rule for understanding or regulating desert asceticism, Athanasius constructs Antony as an increasingly hybrid figure, amalgamating himself from the pieces of knowledge he gains from others.¹²² Anzaldúa aptly describes the relationship between knowledge and space as a corollary to the importance of movement: “Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in a new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape ‘knowing,’ I won’t be moving... ‘Knowing’ is painful because after ‘it’ happens I can’t stay in the same place

¹²¹ Neal Kelsey, “The Body as Desert in the *Life of Saint Antony*,” *Semeia* 57 (1992): 138-39.

¹²² For the evolution of the first monastic rule, see Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before.”¹²³ Moving from one master of the discipline to another, Antony brings together all that he has learned from each of them:

He was sincerely obedient to those men of zeal he visited, and he considered carefully the advantage in zeal and in ascetic living that each held in relation to him. He observed the graciousness of one, the eagerness for prayers in another; he took careful note of one’s freedom from anger, and the human concern of another. And he paid attention to one while he lived a watchful life, or one who pursued studies, as also he admired one for patience, and another for fastings and sleeping on the ground. The gentleness of one and the long-suffering of yet another he watched closely. He marked, likewise, the piety toward Christ and the mutual love of them all. And having been filled in this manner, he returned to his own place of discipline, from that time gathering the attributes of each in himself, and striving to manifest in himself what was best from all (4).

In his ascetic zeal Antony has sought out as many masters of the discipline as he could. Learning from each, he brings together the best of their lessons and manifests these qualities within himself. Knowledge of, and from, the ascetics who have gone before him allows him to become a hybrid of ascetic virtue. Bringing together the lessons from each of these ascetic masters, he embodies the best of each. Even in this early stage, the outer villages between desert and polis offer Antony an opportunity to bring together parts of many into a coalescing self.

If his ambitions have not already been made clear, Athanasius continues his description of Antony’s determined wisdom, writing, “Even toward those of his own age he was not contentious, with the sole exception of his desire that he appear to be second to none of them in moral improvements.” Antony’s ambitious attitude toward Christian asceticism serves Athanasius’s purposes of making Antony a liminal figure and teacher. As a community or new family is established in the desert, Antony stands in as a guide or teacher to these other family members. If there is any novelty in this Christian identity, it

¹²³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 70.

is one that although resistant to normativization, is still open to other family members as they too learn and bring together lessons from him and each other.

Metamorphic Space

Athanasius continues by describing for his readers the progress—mental, physical, and spiritual—that Antony has made in the ascetic discipline. He skips over twenty years of Antony’s life; only telling us that he spent them “pursuing the ascetic life by himself” (14). Athanasius quickly moves his readers past two decades in order to focus on an important scene. Time is collapsed in the service of narrative. However, as time collapses, spatiality continues to pick up the narrative slack. Athanasius pans in on this scene, one day in the span of twenty years, in order to illustrate an important point. The setting is much like those described before. A group of ascetics and would-be desert ascetics have gathered outside the deserted fort Antony has taken up in. However, on this day, unlike any in the twenty years preceding it, they do not wait patiently outside. They tear down the door to the fortress and Antony appears as if “from some shrine (ἀδύτου).” This allusion to Porphyry’s *Life of Pythagoras* further demonstrates Athanasius’s composite desert ascetic.

Antony has been in continuous pursuit of the ascetic discipline and the other ascetics—“his friends”—are surprised to see that his body has maintained a “natural” balance: neither fat nor emaciated. In congruence with his physical state, his mental and spiritual faculties are likewise in a state of harmonious balance. “He maintained utter equilibrium (ὅλος ἦν ἴσος), like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature.” The allusion to an inner, secret sanctuary space where divine mysteries are

revealed and a perfected human state is reached establishes important claims for Athanasius's desert. As we shall see, Antony will continue to learn, transform, and transgress.

Furthermore, as Antony presents himself to the traveling ascetics he stands in as the *ascetic par excellence*, the *new* Christian ascetic, or even the quintessential philosopher. This point in the text is an important indication of just who or what Antony is becoming. Antony emerges from his desert fort perfected and in a natural equilibrium. But more importantly his desert fort has also allowed him to metamorphize. As he emerges from the cave after twenty years, he emerges as a new Antony, the desert ascetic. This desert ascetic is the new philosopher, the new Christ, a hybrid *mestiza* born in the Egyptian desert. He begins to perform miracles; heal the sick, cast out demons, sermonize, and teach. His life in the outer desert has, again, transformed him.

In the closing lines of his description of this important scene, Athanasius emphasizes the authority Antony has acquired over his time in the desert space. He writes, “He persuaded many to take up the solitary life. And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains and the desert was made a city by monks (ἡ ἔρημος ἐπολίσθη μοναχῶν) who came from their own people (ἐξελθόντων τῶν ἰδίων) and registered for citizenship in the heavens (τοῖς οὐρανοῖς πολιτείαν)” (14). There are two important points to be made here. First, like Antony in the beginning of the text, these other monks make an important decision in order to identify with him—with the *new askesis*, or a *mestiza* identity. They have chosen to leave behind their former lives, their own people—to break from the source and disengage with their *tierra*, their *gente* and all that picture stood for—in order to become something new and different. Of course, as

Anzaldúa tells us, one can leave her own people while retaining all that that culture has imparted on them. The collision of cultures is the definition of a *mestiza* identity. She writes:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision.¹²⁴

These desert ascetics—following Antony—embody *mestizaje*. Following Antony they are persuaded to take up the solitary life in order to become citizens of the heavens. The contrast between desert and city serves Athanasius’s purposes of describing this collision. These converts to the solitary way of life, have until then, been a part of either the polis or a desert community. This conversion to a solitary way of life involves bringing together two or more “self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference” for these neophytes. Doing so, as we have seen, involves leaving behind family and all that is known to them. Indeed, Athanasius tells us that these monks “came from their own people.” Again, an underlying theme of Athanasius’s desert asceticism is the break one makes from familial and civic bonds.

After this scene of mass conversion to desert asceticism, Athanasius reminds us of Antony’s popularity as well as the authority he has garnered as a result of his new identity. Antony makes several trips to visit other ascetics; continuously strengthening “the resolve of those who were already monks, and stirr[ing] most of the others to a desire for the discipline” (15). Furthermore, through his many speeches, he causes an influx of monasteries to come “into being, and like a father he guided them all.”

¹²⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 100.

Athanasius continues to depict the newness of desert asceticism as well as the figure of Antony as its originator through his description of Antony as a paternal, teacher figure and guide to budding desert ascetics.¹²⁵ For example, when his disciples come to him in order to hear a discourse, Antony replies “The scriptures are sufficient for instruction, but it is good for us to encourage each other in the faith. Now you, saying what you know, bring this to the father like children, and I, as your elder, will share what I know and the fruits of my experience” (16).

Antony continues in his role as a Christ-like, Pythagoras-like, desert ascetic and continues to deliver sermons to his audience of novice desert ascetics. Relying on the scriptures, he delivers discourses on suffering, death, and the afterlife. Athanasius continues to place in the mouth of Antony an understanding of identity that depends on a spatial awareness and the construct of the Egyptian desert. Antony encourages his students in the discipline:

Now turning back (στραφηναι) is nothing except feeling regret (μεταμεληθηναι) and once more thinking about things of the world. But do not be afraid to hear about virtue, and do not be a stranger to the term. For it is not distant from us, nor does it stand external to us, but its realization lies in us, and the task is easy if only we shall will it. Now the Greeks leave home and traverse the sea in order to gain an education, but there is no need for us to go abroad on account of the Kingdom of heaven, nor cross the sea for virtue. For the Lord has told us before, the Kingdom of God is within you (20).

Athanasius has—again—creatively juxtaposed traditional notions with a new model. Here he invokes Greek education, yet unlike the Greeks before them, the new desert ascetics need not leave home nor traverse the sea in order to gain an education, but instead need only to understand virtue in all of its meaning and look within themselves to

¹²⁵ Rousseau has argued that in the *Life of Antony*, Athanasius describes Antony as a teacher in “ways familiar to ‘philosophical’ or neo-Pythagorean pedagogues of the age.” Rousseau, “Antony as Teacher in the Greek *Life*,” 89-109.

find it. Still, interestingly enough, this passage begins with an invocation not to turn back. But if there is no traversing of space or crossing of seas, to what and from what are they turning? Have these desert ascetics not left home in order to gain an education like Antony did before them? It is clear that Athanasius has again collapsed space and time in order to construct a narrative of returning/finding/creating home. Thus, there is no place to which to turn back. That place that once was is no longer. It is no-place; it is nothing more than regret and desire for materiality. But, according to Antony there is some place else. The space of the Egyptian desert, because it is a homeland, and gives birth to them, it is not merely the space that they inhabit but must also be a space they embody. In this way there is no need to traverse spaces but rather to look deep within themselves—a reflection mirrored by the depth of the desert.

“El secreto terrible”/The Demon Inside

What could it mean that the new birthplace Antony has sought after and found could also provide a dwelling to other beings? Is it possible for the Egyptian desert to be a homeland for desert ascetics and demons as well? Richard Valantasis has suggested the triangulated relationship between demons, desert ascetics, and space, noting, “It is clear that the daemons and the monks have a geographical relationship since they both live in the desert.”¹²⁶ Or, could it be that the demonic is a reflection of the ascetic? Valantasis continues, “They both also practice the same ascetical discipline: withdrawal from society, limiting of food and drink, and vigils.”¹²⁷ As Antony proceeds in his journey

¹²⁶ Richard Valantasis, “Daemons and the Perfecting of the Monk’s Body: Monastic Anthropology, Daemonology, and Asceticism,” *Semeia* 58 (1992): 47-79; 48.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

through the desert, Athanasius details the many demonic-inspired challenges he faces. Demonic spaces in this text are part and parcel of Athanasius's desert. Later in Athanasius's text, after Antony has spent twenty years in solitude and has achieved a state of equilibrium, he explains to his ascetic disciples that demons "were not created as the figures we now identify by 'demon' (δαίμονες), for God made nothing bad (κακὸν). They were made good, but fell from the heavenly wisdom and thereafter wander the earth (22)." Athanasius describes demons in very spatial terms. Here Origen's neoplatonic thinking has heavily influenced Athanasius's cosmology. Antony's discourse on the fall echoes Origen's *On First Principles*.

Demons, as Athanasius understands them, fell from wisdom to wander the earth. But it is clear that the part of earth they have chosen to wander is the desert. This is the space they choose to call home. In the following section I will detail the attacks Antony receives from the demons of the Egyptian desert. What becomes evident regarding these attacks is that although Athanasius continuously tells readers that the demons attack because they are envious of Antony—his love of God, his strength of character, his wisdom—the underlying reason for their discontent with him is spatial. He has moved into their space, their homeland. What I hope to make clear is that because the desert is a *tierra natal*, the demons in the *Life of Antony* have an equal stake in claiming the desert as a homeland. The space gives birth to them just as it does the desert ascetic and in this way the demonic and the ascetic are as if one.

My argument here builds not only on Richard Valantasis but also on David Brakke's work in *Demons and the Making of the Monk*. In his book, Brakke has demonstrated that in the *Life of Antony* the desert ascetic is depicted as heir to the

tradition of Christian martyrdom. As such the new desert ascetic is representative of the ideal Christian. In this reading the demons of Athanasius's desert come to represent the persistence of pagan gods and philosophies which Antony must conquer as the Christian exemplar. I argue that with Brakke's observation of the prominence of Origenist cosmology in Athanasius's hagiography we can read the demons in the *Life of Antony*, spatially. That is, in the *Life of Antony* demons and desert ascetics are cohabitants of the Egyptian desert and, as such, we might be able to see their proximity to each other.

Brakke skillfully employs the theories of Homi Bhabha in order to explicate this proximity between monk and demon. In doing so, he demonstrates the hybridity of the desert ascetic and the gestures toward the amalgamation Anzaldúa has shown to be a part of frontier identities. Brakke suggests that Evagrius's demonology—based on Origenist cosmology—equally assists in interpreting the desert demon as the demon inside. “In this scheme, conflict with the demons became primarily a matter of one's thoughts.”¹²⁸

Understanding the demons in this way allows us to realize the potency of *la frontera*.¹²⁹

Athanasius again constructs a space which gives birth to identity, but that identity is fraught with constant negotiation, contestation, and struggle. Inner struggle only adds to the complexity of identity. As Anzaldúa remarks:

The struggle is inner: Chicano, *indio*, American Indian, *mojado*, *mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness

¹²⁸ Brakke, *Demons*, 52.

¹²⁹ Valantasis has developed a theory for monastic demonology which relies on the use of metaphor to comprehend the demonic inhabitants of monastic texts. He writes, “Daemons are personifications of human experience used to explain the complex relationship between the parts of the body, the body's desires and activities, and the natural resistance to bodily change in the development of virtue. Each one of these systems (monastic anthropology, monastic daemonology, and monastic asceticism) are metaphorical because each explains some aspect of the monastic life by reference to another system of knowledge” (70). Employing Valantasis's theory for monastic demonology, I argue that the metaphoric systems gain potency when understood alongside the equally constructed space of the Egyptian desert.

of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn must come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.¹³⁰

This claim does not suggest however, that all of the demonic attacks are interior. In fact, as we shall see below, the demonic attacks on Antony grow increasingly from interior thoughts and desires to exterior physical abuse. Still, Anzaldúa’s depiction of the interiority of the demonic resonates with Antony’s struggles:

I was two or three years old the first time *Coatlícue* visited my psyche, the first time she “devoured” me (and I “fell” into the underworld). By the worried look on my parents’ faces I learned early that something was fundamentally wrong with me. When I was older I would look into the mirror, afraid of *mi secreto terrible*, the secret sin I tried to conceal—*la seña*, the mark of the Beast. I was afraid it was in plain sight for all to see. The secret I tried to conceal was that I was not normal, that I was not like others. I felt alien. I knew I was alien. I was the mutant stoned out of the herd, something deformed with evil inside.

Similarly, Antony struggles with demons which reveal to him and to us that he is different from others. He is alien.

As we have already seen, the devil attempts to seduce Antony out of the desert with memories of his former family and familial obligations. But the devil also tries to dissuade him from pressing on in his journey by causing Antony to contemplate the amount of time and energy his new life will require of him: “He attempted to lead him away from the discipline, suggesting...the rigor of virtue, and how great the labor is that earns it, suggesting also the bodily weakness and the length of time involved” (5). The devil’s first attack on Antony is entirely psychological. As Athanasius says, “he raised in [Antony’s] mind a great dust cloud of considerations.” Athanasius goes on to describe the back and forth battles between Antony and the devil’s increasingly aggressive attacks on the young monk, including apparitions of the devil disguised as a woman and later as a

¹³⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 109.

“black boy”—both of which are attempts to appeal to Antony’s erotic desires.¹³¹

Athanasius details Antony’s resolve and response to these attacks with prayers and reinvigorated austerity of flesh and mind. Antony’s interactions with the devil are interesting for what they tell us about asceticism, but for my purposes what is most intriguing is what their appearance in the text signifies. The devil and other demons make their appearance in the Egyptian desert. Although Athanasius does inform us that demons will bother any Christians, he is careful to note that they bother monks especially.¹³² Because these battles are necessary for the formation of the true, new, desert ascetic, the depths of the desert along with its demonic inhabitants is the locus of possibility for this new brand of asceticism. Anzaldúa claims that “Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland,” is what leads to creativity.¹³³

Antony’s first move away from the outskirts of the local villages and into the desert occurs after the devil’s initial attacks. Athanasius tells us “Antony went out to the tombs that were situated some distance from the village (ἀπήρχετο εἰς τὰ μακρὰν της κώμης)” (8). The tombs create the context for Athanasius’s strongest claim regarding the relationship between space and identity. He informs us that Antony has locked himself in the tomb, making only one request: that a friend supply him with bread periodically. After he spent some time alone inside the tomb we are told, “The enemy could stand it no longer—for he was apprehensive that Antony might before long make the desert a city of asceticism (ἔρημον πόλιν της ἀσκήσεως)” —a valid concern as we will come to see, but Athanasius’s evocation of the *polis* serves the dual purposes of reminding his readers of where Antony is not, as well as signaling the possibilities of where he is. Again focusing

¹³¹ Brakke, *Demons*, 157-81.

¹³² VA 23.1

¹³³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 95.

on the desert as the locus of possibilities continuously reinforces the link between space and Christian identity.

Antony receives a severe and brutal beating from the demons in the tombs with him. His friend takes him to a nearby village in order to heal and recover with “relatives and people of the village” (8) by his side. When all are asleep he asks to be taken back to the tomb without alerting anyone of his departure. He returns to the tomb and spends the night in deep prayer after which we are told “he yelled out: ‘Here I am—Antony! (ὧδέ εἰμι ἐγὼ Ἀντώνιος)’ ” (9). Athanasius puts in the mouth of his subject an important declaration. As Antony wanders further out into the demon-filled space of Athanasius’s Egyptian desert, he is coming into a fuller understanding of self. When he is taken from that space in order to recover from the nearly deadly beatings he received, his first lucid thoughts are to return to it immediately. Several conclusions arise from Athanasius’s description of this scene. First (and most obviously), the secretive nature of Antony’s return to the outer desert can be attributed to his desire not to be deterred from returning. It is of utmost importance—even to the point of risking his own life—for Antony to return to the desert. Second, and most important, upon his return he loudly proclaims not only his resolve; “‘I do not run from your blows, for even if you give me more, nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ,’” but also his name, the clearest signifier of his identity.

More attacks ensue. This time, demons take the forms of various animals—lions, bears, wolves, and such. Again Antony is brutally attacked and his body ravaged. The battered ascetic maintains his authority within the demonic dominion and calls into question theirs: “If you are able and you did receive authority (ἐξουσίαν) over me, don’t

hold back, but attack. But if you are unable, why, when it is in vain, do you disturb me?” (10). With these words, Antony not only questions the authority of the demons in a space they have claimed as their own; he delegitimizes it. Athanasius takes it a step further when he has Antony proclaim, “For faith in our Lord is for *us* an official seal (σφραγίς) and a wall of protection.”¹³⁴ But who does “us” refer to? Does it refer to all Christians or to the newly developing desert ascetic? It appears as though Athanasius is here continuing his claim that with Antony a new kind of Christian identity is emerging.

Anzaldúa’s own demonic attacks are helpful for understanding the potential for creativity and identity making by the demonic.

*Musa bruja, venga. Cúbrese
con una sàbana y espante mis demonios que a rempujones y
a cachetadas me roban la pluma me rompen el sueño. Musa,
¡misericordia!*

*Óigame, musa bruja. ¿Por qué
huye uste’ en mi cara? Su grito me desarrolla de mi caracola,
me sacude el alma. Vieja, quítese de aquí con sus alas de
navaja. Ya no me despedaze mi cara. Vaya con sus pinche uñas
que me desgarran de los ojos hasta los talones. Váyase a la
tiznada. Que no me coman, le digo, Que no me coman sus
nueve dedos caníbales.*

*Hija negra de la noche, car-
nala, ¿Por qué me sacas las tripas, por qué cardas mis
entrañas? Este hilvanando palabras con tripas me está matan-
do. Jija de la noche ¡vete a la chingada!*

Come, muse witch. Cover yourself
with a sheet and frighten away my demons who by shoving and
slapping my face steal my pen and destroy my sleep. Muse,
have mercy!

¹³⁴ My emphasis.

Listen to me, muse witch. Why
do you run away in my presence? Let your cry break me free from my shell,
let it shake my soul. Old hag, get away from here with your wings made of
knives. Tear my face, no more. Leave with your damned nails
that rip me apart from head to toe. Go to
hell. I'm telling you, your nine canibal fingers
won't eat me, they won't eat me.

Black daughter of the night, sister,
why do you take out my intestines, why do you take out my
guts? Threading words together with my intestines is killing me.
Daughter of the night, go to hell!¹³⁵

This nightmarish and violent scene is distilled into the tension and struggle Anzaldúa attempts to resolve regarding her identity, which, as she notes, must remain unresolved. “Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen.”¹³⁶ For Anzaldúa, the borderlands are haunted spaces. And likewise, the Egyptian desert remains haunted for Antony.

What follows immediately after Antony's demonic-bestial attack is a brief conversation between Antony and God. Antony questions God's whereabouts during his interactions with the devil and God reassures him that he has been with him the entire time, will forever help him, and will even make him famous. After this divine conversation, Antony leaves the tomb the following day and sets out to head into the desert with only God's promise to help him. More important in this passage, however, a shift in authority has occurred. As the demons demonstrate they have no authority

¹³⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 94. My translation.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

(ἐξουσίαν) over Antony, they likewise reveal that they lack any authority over the space of the desert. Furthermore, as their authority over the desert becomes increasingly delegitimized with every failed attack, so Antony's authority over the desert space becomes increasingly legitimized.

As Antony ventures further out into the Egyptian desert, the text reminds us of the desert's abundant population. Athanasius cleverly places two hurdles obstructing Antony's journey forward. The first is a demonic illusion, "the craft of the devil." As he is walking, Antony comes upon a large silver dish. He is able to deduce that the likelihood of finding such a great treasure in the remote desert is small. He notes aloud to himself that this is most certainly the work of the devil and denounces the devil, shouting, "You will not frustrate my purpose by this, Devil!" (11). Then, with his proclamation, the dish "vanished like smoke from fire." As he continues along his way Athanasius tells us "he saw next no illusion, but actual gold thrown in his path" (12). Athanasius makes clear the authenticity of the gold, thereby also noting the authenticity of Antony's character. Antony is able to avoid financial temptations not simply because he knows they are false illusions but rather because "he was not, in fact, concerned about money"—real or illusory.

The juxtaposition of these two temptations is interesting in that the desert is useful for comprehending their appearance. In the first case, Antony is able to discern the illusion for what it is because the existence of such a large treasure is out of place in the desert. Athanasius makes it a point to have Antony note, "This place is desert" (12). His obvious point is to substantiate the untraveled nature of the space. Antony asks, "A dish here in the wilderness? Where did it come from? This place has not been traveled, nor is

there a trace of any travelers here. Since it is large it could not have been missed if it fell.” However, when Antony comes upon the scattered gold there is a marked difference. Here Antony makes no proclamation about the vast solitude of the desert and therefore the curiousness of this apparition. In fact Antony says nothing at all. Instead, Athanasius steps in to make clear that the gold was not an illusion and the origin of its placement in the desert remains unknown. He goes on to tell us that the gold may have even been placed there by “some more excellent power” than the devil in order to “[train] the athlete and [demonstrate] to the devil that he was not, in fact, concerned about money.” What is interesting about these temptations is the way the desert is transformed from a desolate space to one populated by something other than the saint. For the silver dish the desert’s vast solitude serves only to bring into stark relief the contrasting vision of such a large treasure. However, as Athanasius describes the appearance of gold, the lack of spatial descriptions as well as Antony’s silence on the matter shows readers the fluidity of the desert.

It is only after Antony succeeds in resisting the temptation that Athanasius once again resumes his description of the Egyptian desert; “Intensifying more and more his purpose, he hurried toward the mountain. When he discovered beyond the river a deserted fortress, empty so long that reptiles filled it, he went there, and took up residence in it” (12). The animal life of the Egyptian desert is another important aspect assisting in the production of the desert ascetic identity. I will take up this discussion in the following chapter on Jerome’s *Life of Paul*, but for now, let this brief passage serve as an example of Athanasius’s continued vivid descriptions of desert space.

Demons continue to attack Antony even after he takes up residence in his newly found mountainside retreat. I have already briefly mentioned the other (presumably) Christian ascetics who take up residence outside of Antony's dwelling. We know that they do not yet possess the courage to withstand the demonic forces, but we have yet to discuss further the altercation that sent them fleeing from Antony's front door hearing as they ran only his words of counsel to "seal [them]selves with the sign and depart with confidence" (13). But what exactly gave these ascetics such a fright? The answer reminds us of the importance of space for burgeoning identities within late ancient Christianity.

According to Athanasius, the ascetics waiting outside of Antony's enclosure begin to hear raised voices and noises coming from inside the ascetic's cave. "They heard what sounded like clamoring mobs inside making noises, emitting pitiful sounds and crying out, 'Get away from what is ours (ἀπόστα τῶν ἡμετέρων)! What do you have to do with the desert (τί σοὶ καὶ τῆ ἐρήμῳ)?" If Antony is searching for a new homeland to replace the one from which he has turned away, he is finding the Egyptian desert to be the perfect space precisely because of the challenges to stake any claim there. The novelty of desert asceticism therefore Athanasius presents not as being about inhabiting the previously *uninhabited*, but rather the previously *uninhabitable*. That is, the desert ascetic inhabits the space belonging to the demonic.¹³⁷ The demons remind us (and Antony!) that this space is spoken for. They do not simply inhabit the desert, but claim this space as their own. Questioning Antony about his motives is an interesting rhetorical move on Athanasius's part. It presents the demons in the vulnerable position of

¹³⁷ See Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). Brown has defined the period of late antiquity in part by the "rise to ever greater prominence of human agents of the supernatural" (15).

displacement. Up to this point we have been told about the torture they inflict on Antony, but we have not been told why. Other than Athanasius's terse remarks regarding the devil's distaste for a life geared toward faith and prayer in a Christian God, we can only speculate as to why the demons are attacking Antony with such vengeance. But here we learn that he has forced his way into a space they call their (home?) own. Athanasius defines Christian ascetics not only by their fearlessness of the demonic, but also by their ability to enter into the demonic realms on earth and inhabit them as their own.

Later in the text as Antony encourages the novice desert ascetics and explains to them the demonic challenges they will face, he describes a visit he received from the devil. Antony tells them that Satan knocked on his door one afternoon, introduced himself, and inquired "Why do the monks and all the other Christians (μοναχοὶ καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι πάντες χριστιανοί) censure me without cause?" (41). The dialogue continues with a peculiarly friendly exchange, but then their conversation takes an aggravated and even violent turn. Satan asks Antony, "Haven't they read that the swords of their enemy have failed utterly, and that you have destroyed their cities (πόλεις καθεῖλες)?"¹³⁸ Satan continues in a dramatic plea evocative of one's nostalgic desire for place, city, and space. Satan says to the desert ascetic, "I no longer have a place (οὐκέτι τόπον)—no weapon, no city (οὐ πόλιν). There are Christians everywhere, and even the desert has filled with monks (καὶ ἡ ἔρημος πεπλήρωται μοναχῶν)." The exchange ends with Antony invoking the "Savior's name," causing Satan to become "scorched" by it and thus rendering the devil invisible due to its inability to "endure" the spoken name of Christ. What is of particular interest, however, is Satan's discourse on displacement.

¹³⁸ An allusion to Psalm 9:6.

The use of “monastic demonology” within Athanasius’s text highlights the identity of the desert ascetic. As Valantasis notes, “The daemons enable the monk to construct the monk’s new body through the ascetical activity which the presence of the daemons and passions necessitates.”¹³⁹ Furthermore, as Anzaldúa makes clear, the demonic assist in the production of identity even if (or better yet perhaps, *because*) that identity remains ambiguous and uncontainable. She tells us that the inner demons that haunt her equally identify with her. Even as they simultaneously attempt to destroy her, she recognizes that they are her. Similarly, As David Brakke has argued, Antony’s demons are reflections of the ascetic self.¹⁴⁰

Going Home Again

Antony’s presence displaces demons. The influx of ascetics seeking a new life defined by a desert identity and rooted in the space of the desert furthers this displacement. Athanasius continues his description of desert asceticism by describing the Egyptian desert as a space already on the brink of constructing identities. That is, desert ascetics are so because they have not only come to inhabit the space of the desert, but also because they have recognized it as a homeland and thus displaced what was already there—the devil and its demons—calling that place home.

Athanasius’s desert is in the process of active and continually changing of forms. It is also a rebirth of the homeland. The desert ascetic not only displaces but also returns. In Anzaldúan terms this flux is one of rebirth. She tells us, “Yes, the Chicano and Chicana have always taken care of growing things and the land...Growth, death, decay,

¹³⁹ Valantasis, “Daemons,” 74.

¹⁴⁰ Brakke, *Demons*, 157-181.

birth. The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, *renacimientos de la tierra madre*.

This land was Mexican once
was Indian always
and is.
And will be again.¹⁴¹

Athanasius describes in no uncertain terms the transformability of desert space and its importance for contemplating a divine space.

So their cells in the hills were like tents filled with divine choirs—people chanting, studying, fasting, praying, rejoicing in the hopes of future boons, working for the distribution of alms, and maintaining both love and harmony among themselves. It was as if one truly looked on a land all its own—a land of devotion and righteousness. For neither perpetrator nor victim of injustice was there... And there was a multitude of ascetics, but among them all there was one mind, and it was set on virtue, so that when one saw the cells again and such orderliness among the monks, he was moved to exclaim and say, How lovely are your dwellings, Jacob, and your tents, Israel; like shady groves, and like a garden by a river, and like tents which the Lord pitched, and like cedars beside the waters (44).

After this utopian-like description of the desert, Athanasius goes on to describe Antony's further ruminations; "[he] sighed daily, reflecting on the dwellings in heaven, both longing for these and contemplating the ephemeral life of human beings (ἐφήμερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων βίον)" (45). As readers we are reminded that his desert, which came into being as a paradise simultaneously with Antony's coming into being as a *mestiza*, a desert ascetic, is again, like its co-constituent, impermanent. With this realization, we are able to regroup and refocus on the real prize of this contest, the divine heaven.

It is important to remember that for Athanasius, the prize for this contest is not the divine heaven simply as a new space or a new home. Rather, according to his cosmology the desert is simultaneously a new space and equally a return home; therefore his journey

¹⁴¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 113.

is a journey home. Brakke notes that for a desert ascetic like Evagrius, the journey into the desert was a return journey home. Evagrius's knowledge of Athanasius's *Life* allowed him to understand his journey into the desert as a "move toward theological knowledge, that of the Trinity itself. In this way, the monk's journey was a return trip, because—like our fellow rational being, the angels and the demons—we human beings had originated as pure intellects in contemplation of God, from which we had fallen."¹⁴² Similarly, Burrus notes, "Pushing on the outer edges of habitable land, Antony finds himself suddenly on the inside of a place he recognizes as home."¹⁴³

In describing the centuries-long and continuing migration of people from the interior of Mexico north in search of *the* homeland, Anzaldúa articulates the notions of newness and *retorno*. She writes, "We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing *la migración de los pueblos mexicanos*, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán...*El retorno* to the promised land" (33). Aztlán figures prominently in the spatial thinking of Anzaldúa. This is because Aztlán is the perfect metaphor for the borderlands. Aztlán functions as a space with hitorio-mythical qualities, a geographic space, and a conceptual space. Many Chicana/os recognize Aztlán s as a mythical place whence their ancestors migrated south. Based on this it functions as a real geographic space as many Chicana/os see the U.S. southwest as Aztlán, and it functions as a conceptual space as a galvanizing utopic space for the Chicana/o movement.¹⁴⁴ This is the spatial thinking that foregrounds Anzaldúa's own spatial theories.

¹⁴² Brakke, *Demons*, 51-52.

¹⁴³ Burrus, *Begotten Not Made*, 74.

¹⁴⁴ Jacqueline Hidalgo, "We Are Aztlán: Writing Scriptures, Writing Utopia in *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*," (Paper presented at Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA, April 4, 2014).

As she describes it, the borderlands, the space indicative and productive of identity, are not merely spaces of possibility but also, simultaneously, a homeland. This homeland is fraught with danger even while it is important to selfhood and becoming. Or, better still, it is fraught with danger *because* it is so important to selfhood and becoming. Anzaldúa goes on to say of *mestizas* that they migrate to the borderlands, “Faceless, nameless, invisible, taunted...trembling with fear, yet filled with courage, a courage born of desperation.” They gather in this border space, “where two worlds merge creating what Reagan calls a frontline, a war zone. The convergence has created a shock culture, a border culture, a third country, a closed country.”¹⁴⁵ As we have seen, Athanasius has described desert asceticism and the Egyptian desert in similar terms. Fraught with danger and potent with possibilities.

Conclusions

As the *Life* begins to draw toward an end, Athanasius reminds us what the journey through the desert has been about. He describes a scene in which the aging desert ascetic catches a glimpse of himself being guided through the air “as if he were outside himself” (65). He is being guided through the air by “certain beings.” Although we are never told, we assume they are benevolent beings because they are contrasted with “foul, terrible figures” with whom the “certain beings” combat. As Antony roams above he is also still anchored to the desert space below.

At the same time we are also reminded that Antony has come into the desert in order to become a desert ascetic, that is, in order to enter *la conciencia de la mestiza*, and that desert space is conceived by Athanasius as a sacred location which makes this

¹⁴⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 33.

possible. The terrible beings want to block Antony from continuing on his guided bird's-eye tour of the Egyptian desert and so they begin to question him and his guides regarding the life of Antony. But the guides put an end to their questions stating, "The Lord has wiped clean the items dating from his birth, but from the time he became a monk, and devoted himself to God, you can take account" (65). Splitting Antony yet again, Athanasius proclaims that the Antony who existed before entering the desert and the celebrated desert ascetic are not the same person. If one can begin here to see Athanasius subtly directing the characters of his own drama, it is because he has masterfully woven himself in and out of the narrative.

He has again returned us to the very beginning of his text and answered the lingering and embarrassing question we have harbored all along. If Athanasius purports to explain to his readers who Antony was before he entered the desert—as he tells us he will—then why has he failed to do so? Again, he tells us, "The Lord has wiped clean the items dating from his birth, but from the time he became a monk, and devoted himself to God, you can take account!" The culmination of this scene marks an important turn in Antony's journey. The "foul, terrible figures" are unable to keep Antony from proceeding in his aerial journey and the "passage opened before him free and unobstructed. And just then he saw himself appear to come and stand with himself, and once more he was Antony, as before (πάλιν ἦν ὁλος Ἀντώνιος)." Athanasius has brought his readers into the desert and even up and into the air in order to gain the panoptical perspective of the narrated space. The Egyptian desert marks the birth of Antony and the desert ascetic, but we, along with Antony are only able to understand this becoming when he is split once, and then again, and then brought back together, "once more...Antony, as before."

The *Life of Antony* takes its readers on a journey that reveals the creative mind of the late ancient writer, Athanasius. We see the tensions in Athanasius's text as he attempts to define a Christian subject that remains nonetheless undefined. So, we are left with an indeterminate determinate—an abundance of meaning and signification for late ancient asceticism, evident in both the desert space and the saint.

In what has been regarded by historians and theologians alike as a formative text in the history of Christianity, one is able to perceive the making of Christian identities. More important, perhaps, is that in this text, the identity being defined can be characterized by the instability of Anzaldúa's *mestizaje*. As with Anzaldúa, space functions as an indication of identity. An important, though often misinterpreted character of the dynamic drama that is Athanasius's *Life* is the Egyptian desert. Too often the *real* desert has overshadowed the power of Athanasius's literary creation and his *imagined* desert. Even as scholars attempt to recognize Athanasius's literary creativity in his construction of the desert, it is easy to slip into the "reality" of desert space. When one lets go of preconceived notions of the desert reality in this text—i.e. climate, geology, topography, geography, animal inhabitants—and instead accounts for the creative and simultaneous literary constructions of identity and space, then the possibilities, varieties, and necessities of identities for late ancient Christians can emerge. Anzaldúa signals these possibilities when she discusses her own writing about borderland space.

This book, then, speaks of my existence. My preoccupations with the inner life of the Self, and with the struggle of that Self amidst adversity and violation; with the confluence of primordial images; with the unique positionings consciousness takes at these confluent streams; and with my almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows (Preface to First Edition).

Anzaldúa's pen gives birth to *la frontera* much as it has given birth to her. Similarly, Athanasius creates the Egyptian desert and Christian ascetic as intersecting planes of meaning. Whether or not his attempt was to close off these meanings, his desert and saint will not allow such closure.

By looking at the various inhabitants of Athanasius's desert, we are able to see a variety of spatial configurations. The desert community is a new *familia* for Antony. His relationship to them helps us to see the kind of identity at work in Athanasius's creation. Similarly the demonic inhabitants offer us a reflective quality of who or what Antony is. The desert is a space that brings all of these figures together as one collective by which we can interpret that desert saint. In this way, it is most appropriately considered a borderland. The space is generative of *amasamiento* and also indicative of a return home.

CHAPTER 3

SAINTS, CENTAURS, AND SATYRS: GOING WILD IN THE EGYPTIAN DESERT

Forty years it's taken me to enter into the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul.

-Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

Jerome's *Life of Paul* offers its readers a spectacular description of the Egyptian desert replete with an array of animal life. If the demonic life of Athanasius's desert is one of its most salient features, it is the abundant hybridity of animal life that is most prominent in Jerome's hagiography of the first desert saint. Gloria Anzaldúa again offers a useful heuristic lens through which to read the saint's Life. More specifically, her reflections on animality can render more clearly the animality of humanity and of human identity. Here, as in the *Life of Antony*, reading with Anzaldúa reveals not only the hybridity and instability of late ancient Christian identity, but also the very conditions and collisions upon which this identity is founded. Simultaneously, this move to read Christian hagiography in this way will also highlight the close relationship between emergent hybrid subjectivities and a conceptualization of space. That is to say, Jerome's desert and Anzaldúa's *frontera* become the spaces in which *mestiza* identities—characterized in these texts by their varying transgressions—are continuously formed, deformed, and reformed.

Similar to Athanasius in his *Life of Antony*, Jerome fashions the Egyptian desert as the space productive of and produced by Christian identity—more specifically, a

desert ascetic identity. Jerome authors an ascetic identity that emerges in and through its relationship with the desert, marked by its hybrid multiplicity and its instability. He relies on the already well-known figure of Antony in order to demonstrate to his readers the heterogeneous identity of desert asceticism through his descriptions of the desert's abundant animal life. More importantly, however, Jerome creates a narrative of shock which not only fills in some of the gaps in Athanasius's story, as "the topic [that] has been ignored (*magis quia res omissa erat*)" (VP1),¹⁴⁶ but also describes Antony as a character attempting to "enter into the serpent," as Anzaldúa describes herself doing in the epigraph above.¹⁴⁷ Here, materiality and corporeality are intrinsically tied to identity and therefore to desert asceticism. Patricia Cox Miller suggests that the fourth century is emblematic of a turn toward the material.¹⁴⁸ Taking my cue from Miller, I will demonstrate that late ancient hagiography, in its attempts to construct Christian identity, does so through an awareness of the human body—the desert ascetic body—which is also always an awareness of, or rather, as Anzaldúa puts it, an *assimilation to*, the animal body. Below I will detail how the *Life of Paul the Hermit*, an important addition to the emergent literature of Christian hagiography in late antiquity, becomes not only an apt mode of description of *mestizaje*—the hybridity of identity—but also exemplary of *mestiza* consciousness. Furthermore, the description of the desert ascetic identity in Jerome's hagiography is best read alongside Anzaldúa's notions of collision, or *choque*, and trauma. As she describes, coming into the serpent, or into a *mestiza* consciousness, can be a violent and painful experience.

¹⁴⁶ I rely on the translation by Paul Harvey, "Jerome, Life of Paul, the First Hermit" in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 357-69).

¹⁴⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 48.

¹⁴⁸ Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

For Anzaldúa, *mestiza* consciousness is an awareness. It is an awareness of the multiplicity and hybridity of particular identities and the coalescing of this multiplicity:

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity... She can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence. I'm not sure exactly how. The work takes place underground—subconsciously. It is work that the soul performs. That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the *mestiza* stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness—and though it is a source of pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each paradigm.¹⁴⁹

This fusion of selves is not merely a “balancing of opposing powers,” but is rather the work of self-knowledge born out of *amasamiento* or amalgamation and comprehension which leaves still intact the messiness and instability of identity along with the pain, memory, and trauma of the violence from the crash—the collision or *choque*. Collision seems an apt metaphor for describing the kind of fusion Anzaldúa recognizes and advocates. Seen in this way, *mestiza* consciousness is always already associated with a history of violence and shock.

It is through the animal life of Jerome's desert that a *mestiza* consciousness becomes available for Jerome's Antony. In his description of the desert space, Jerome's featuring of its nonhuman creatures suggests the importance of these figures for his own understanding of Christian identity and the ascetic discipline. Jerome depicts for his readers a Christian ascetic who journeys to meet a true master of the discipline and in the process discovers his own multiple, unstable, hybrid nature. Focusing on the creatures encountered by an aging Antony on his way to meet his predecessor in the ascetic

¹⁴⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 95.

discipline will illumine their rhetorical function as mirrors for Antony's own continuous process of revelation and self-knowledge. Jerome's Antony embarks on a collision course with himself. This journey begins with the revelation that a greater man than he exists (*revelatum est esse alium interius multo se meliorem*) (8) and culminates with Antony's discovery of the kind of being a desert ascetic is. Most important for my purposes, this narrative takes place in the Egyptian desert—a space already constructed with potential as a borderland space by Athanasius. Jerome's desert, where centaurs, satyrs, wolves, ravens, and lions are featured as primary characters alongside desert ascetics, will prove to be a borderland space depicting emerging Christian identities.

More than a simple reflection of late ancient ecology and the attitudes of Christians toward nonhuman animals, the animal life in Jerome's Egyptian desert functions as a mirror with dual expressions.¹⁵⁰ On the one hand, Jerome's creatures ground the text within the space of the Egyptian desert. Because these wild, beastly beings could be found roaming freely in a space that was their own home (as Jerome himself puts it, the desert is the space *known* for engendering monstrous animals), they are a reflection and constant reminder of this space. On the other hand, they are a reflection of the desert ascetic self. They remain a constant reminder of the multiple identities that make up the *mestiza* self. These creatures come to reflect Antony's own sense of self.

Noting the curious appearance of the creatures in Jerome's desert, Miller, and more recently Burrus, have each discussed how Jerome's creatures are themselves

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, Susan Bratton, "The Original Desert Solitaire: Early Christian Monasticism and Wilderness," in *Environmental Ethics* 10:1 (1988): 31-53. Bratton argues that Christian ascetics were able to relate to wild creatures: "Further study of Christian monasticism and wilderness values should be expected to describe a variety of attitudes, many of which are positive or indicate strong identification with wild sites or wild creatures."

reflections of ascetic identity.¹⁵¹ Peter Brown has suggested that this reflection is indicative of a real fear that desert ascetics had to confront. “This was the dire state of *adiaphoria* [indifference]. In it, the boundaries of man and desert, human and beast collapsed in chilling confusion. *Adiaphoria*... was the condition that the Desert Fathers observed most anxiously, and described most graphically, because they feared it most deeply in themselves.”¹⁵² For Miller, the centaur’s wildness points toward the wildness of space and saint. “Jerome’s wild man thus advertises not only the ideal nature of ascetic experience but also the savagery—the barbarism within—that was its enduring and painful companion.”¹⁵³ Building on Miller, Burrus notes the abundance of signification bound up in the desert saint. More than reflecting the animality of desert asceticism, this abundance signifies the animality of humanity and leads Burrus to suggest, “that saints are the monsters among us animals—ominous portents, oversaturated signs, abysses of meaning.”¹⁵⁴ I agree with Miller that a “regression to bestiality” is not what Jerome feared most. She claims, “What appears to have been most fearsome to Jerome was not this literal form of reversion to the beast but rather its psychological companion, the unleashing of the passions—especially sexual passions—that accompanied ascetic practice.”¹⁵⁵ Building on Miller and Burrus, I will suggest that Jerome is working to collapse the divide between the human and the animal in order to make perceptible the infinite possibilities of hybridity and likewise the desert ascetic identity. Furthermore, as I

¹⁵¹ See: Patricia Cox Miller, “Jerome’s Centaur: A Hyper-Icon of the Desert,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996): 209-33, Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saint*, 24-32, and Burrus, “Wyschogrod’s Hand: Saints, Animality, and the Labor of Love,” *Philosophy Today* 55 (2011): 412-21.

¹⁵² Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 220.

¹⁵³ Miller, “Jerome’s Centaur,” 233.

¹⁵⁴ Burrus, “Wyschogrod’s Hand,” 419.

¹⁵⁵ Miller, “Jerome’s Centaur,” 232.

will demonstrate below, his hagiography of the first desert ascetic celebrates this near collapse for its generative qualities.

More than the other creatures (a wolf, a raven, and a couple of lions) of Jerome's desert, the centaur and satyr attract much attention because of their chimeric qualities as well as their placement in the Egyptian desert. Paul Harvey has likewise noted their odd appearance in Jerome's hagiography.¹⁵⁶ However, his reading of the *Life of Paul* is a response to a historiographic tradition that has characterized the appearance of a centaur and satyr as "bizarre"¹⁵⁷ or as having the qualities of "a fairy-tale."¹⁵⁸ Instead, Harvey rightly notes, "to label is not to explain and analyze."¹⁵⁹ Harvey singles out the centaur and satyr for his analysis. It is not difficult to explain why the other creatures of Jerome's desert—a wolf, a raven, and a pair of lions—do not deserve similar scrutiny. Harvey argues that while centaurs and satyrs were recognizable creatures in antiquity, more modern sensibilities have found them difficult to explain in Jerome's desert.¹⁶⁰ Harvey demonstrates that the creatures in Jerome's desert while romantically colorful were usefully didactic and intentionally accessible to a wide range of Christian readers. Furthermore, Harvey rightly notes that the centaur and satyr are "more than simple romantic entertainment and reflections of Jerome's knowledge of one strand of Latin scholarship and European folklore. These fantastic creatures play causative roles in Jerome's *Life of Paul* by guiding Antony to Paul."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ Paul Harvey, "Saints and Satyrs: Jerome the Scholar at Work," in *Athenaeum* 86.1 (1998): 35-56.

¹⁵⁷ See for example, Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 134.

¹⁵⁸ See for example, J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 60.

¹⁵⁹ Harvey, "Saints and Satyrs," 39.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

Late ancient hagiographical narratives set in the unknown spaces of Egypt's desert allowed for a confrontation between the desert ascetic and the nonhuman animal. Contrasted with later hagiographical developments in which the animal functions as a passive creature to be dominated and controlled by the saint, Jerome's animals maintain a sense of autonomy—and as residents of the desert, a sense of authority.¹⁶² The confrontation reveals the precarious boundaries between the human and the animal, and perhaps even the divine.

Furthermore, as will become clear below, Jerome develops a conceptual desert space that collapses distance and gives way to narrative. Soja has helpfully determined this conflation of spaces as the kind of thirdspace I am alluding to in these hagiographies. Soja uses the narrative of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges as an illustrative example of Thirdspace. In "The Aleph," Borges's short story in which a particular consciousness arises out of the ability to see all places and times at once (not overlapped in a messy non-cohesive manner, but in a clear, multiple, and relational way) the opening for understanding space in "thirthing-as-Othering" terms, is made present. Soja writes,

"The Aleph" is an invitation to exuberant adventure as well as a humbling, cautionary tale, an allegory on infinite complexities of space and time. Attaching its meaning to Lefevbre's conceptualization of the production of space detonates the scope of spatial knowledge and reinforces the radical openness of what I am trying to convey as Thirdspace: the space where all places are, capable of being seen from every angle.¹⁶³

Soja's reading of "The Aleph" is apt for reading scenes in Jerome's hagiography of Paul. Even if the scene is reduced to a miracle or visionary tale, it is still a moment in

¹⁶² See, for example, Lisa Bitel's excellent study of the hagiographies dedicated to St. Briget of Ireland. Bitel notes, "Briget obeyed God and men, and thus, men, women, animals, and even the forces of nature, obeyed the saint." Bitel, "Body of a Saint, Story of a Goddess: Origins of the Brigidine Tradition," in *Textual Practice* 16.1 (2002): 215.

¹⁶³ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 56.

which the space of the desert collapses and Antony is able to see several places at once. As Antony races toward Paul—his second journey within only a few days—he is able to see his new friend and teacher ascend into heaven from the place where he is, still a three-hour journey from the dwelling of the elder ascetic. If this is a particular kind of consciousness, as Soja suggests it is, I argue that it is the *mestiza* consciousness Anzaldúa has described as made possible in the borderlands. I build on these prior readings as I explore Jerome’s desert and its resonances with the borderlands. As in the preceding chapter, I will continue to show the desert’s relevance as a spatial construction utilized in the production of identity—that is, of a late-ancient *mestizaje*.

Serpentine Identity

The “animality of *mestizaje*,” as discussed by Anzaldúa, opens up the possibility of a “new consciousness”—a *mestiza* consciousness. Animality and *mestizaje* are constitutive of each other. For Anzaldúa they are not one and the same, but rather neither can be understood independent of the other. She recounts a childhood memory of an almost deadly encounter with a venomous rattlesnake. After being bitten, she uses a pocketknife in order to cut open the site of the snakebite. As the blood spills from the wound she sucks out the venom and spits it onto the ground. She says, “That night I watched the window sill, watched the moon dry the blood on the tail, dreamed rattler fangs filled my mouth, scales covered my body. In the morning I saw through snake eyes, felt snake blood course through my body. The serpent, *mi tono*, my animal counterpart. I was immune to its venom. Forever immune.”¹⁶⁴ Through her description of her near death experience, she blurs the line between the animal and human in order to highlight the animality of both. Doing so leads her to comprehension of the “in-between” and the

¹⁶⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 76.

suppleness of life and identity. According to Anzaldúa this comprehension can only become tenable through an act of rupture that is at times violent and painful and yet nurturing and life-giving. Her immunity to the snake's venom is born out of her painful assimilation to the most basic nature of her being.

The embodiment of the animal becomes most explicit with Anzaldúa's ruminations on language. The title of her chapter on language, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," is indicative of this embodiment and its strong implications for identity formation. "Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out," she tells us.¹⁶⁵ The violence of assimilation is, again, not lost on Anzaldúa, and neither is the persistence of the wild, animal, *mestiza* tongue which can only be changed by being severed from the rest of the body—rendering not a new form of communication but, rather, silence. And still, this wild tongue that does persist can only do so by constantly revealing itself—the wild, *mestiza* self. Every word, every utterance, is a signification of the multiple, hybrid self forged in the spaces capable of fostering hybridity and multiplicity (for Anzaldúa the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, for Jerome the Egyptian desert). Furthermore, every word, every utterance, is a signification of the escape from a violent silencing. And so, Anzaldúa urges us that the *mestiza* must be heard! And everyone else must listen. "*Oyé como ladra: el lenguaje de la frontera*/Hear Her Bark: The Language of the Borderlands," the title of a subsection in her chapter on language, is both an invocation and an indication. Hear her bark. The language of the borderlands is wild and perhaps—to some—incomprehensible. Still, it must be heard. Precisely because of its persistence, it must be heard.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 76.

This language is tied to the *mestiza* life. Not only because language is a part of life—but because this language is a representation of the people to whom it belongs. Anzaldúa tells us, “Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. Change, *evolución, enriquecimiento de palabras nuevas por invención o adopción* (enrichment of new words by invention or adoption) have created variants of Chicano Spanish, *un nuevo lenguaje. Un lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir* (a new language. A language that corresponds to a way of life). Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language...we speak a patois, a forked tongue.”¹⁶⁶ Language for Anzaldúa is a key signifier of the *mestiza* life. Chicano Spanish—as she calls it—has utility as a form of communication, but its “natural” formation mirrors that of its millions of users. For Jerome, language—communication—is also an important signifier.¹⁶⁷ His Antony struggles, learns, and proceeds via communication both foreign and familiar. As is well known for Jerome, the processes and intricacies of language were instrumental in shaping his life, his writings, and what would become his enduring legacy.¹⁶⁸

The Life of Paul

Before further analyzing Jerome’s account of Paul the hermit, a brief summary of the text would be useful. Jerome opens his account of the first desert saint with two

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁶⁷ Again, it is relevant that hagiography—a genre that refuses genre—is equally hybrid and therefore also emblematic of a “border tongue.” Thus, not only is Jerome’s Antony a character faced with the delicate intricacies of translation and communication, but one written into a genre of literature that is part history, part biography, part ancient novel, the narrative further mirrors the hybrid identity of desert asceticism.

¹⁶⁸ See Harvey and more recently Megan Hale Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Williams has emphasized the importance of Jerome’s translations of the Hebrew Scriptures and the gospel stories into the Latin Vulgate. Williams further notes the importance Jerome placed on learning Hebrew and translating directly from the scriptures instead of relying on the Septuagint. This emphasis on the original written language of these texts exemplifies Jerome’s own regard for the intricate and nuances nature of language.

martyrdom accounts. The stories of these martyrs set up the historical moment in which Paul is living and they move readers to the beginning of his life. We learn that Paul decides to flee the persecutions by escaping from Thebes, the city of his birth. When a disloyal family member threatens his safety, Paul is forced to withdraw into the desert. Leaving humankind and city life behind, Paul finds a place to reside and remains there for the duration of his life. Meanwhile, Antony learns while in his desert cell of Paul's existence and sets out to find the older ascetic. Along his journey, Antony encounters a centaur, a satyr, and a wolf, each of which assists him in his mission to find Paul. Once he finds Paul, they spend time together, breaking bread delivered by a raven and exchanging stories. Then Paul asks Antony to fetch him the cloak given to him by Athanasius so that Antony can bury him in it. Antony agrees to do so and on his journey back to Paul with the cloak in hand, he glimpses Paul's ascension to heaven. Once he reaches the dwelling, he finds the body of Paul in a position of prayer. He wraps Paul's body in Athanasius's cloak and with the help of two lions buries the body. Jerome closes his account by begging his readers to remember Jerome the sinner and by expressing his preference to live the life of Paul, more than any other life, even that of kings.

Desert Asceticism and the Animal Instinct

According to Jerome, he pens his hagiography of the first desert saint "because the topic has been ignored" by previous writers (1). He is familiar with Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, and attempts to surpass that innovative hagiography by writing about a man older, wiser, saintlier, and, interestingly, further in the desert ("*ulterius et in terris*") (7) than Antony. It is not clear what exactly Paul is further from (presumably the polis, but also perhaps simply further in distance from Antony). Still, Jerome indicates a spatial

awareness that seemingly links saintliness with distance. After discussing his intentions, Jerome moves swiftly into two martyrdom narratives followed by his introduction to the very young Paul. A parallel to Athanasius's Antony, Jerome's Paul loses his parents at a young age and is heir to their wealth. Also like Antony, he inherits from his family "a gentle disposition and deep love for God." Because of this love of the Christian God and because of the rise in Christian persecutions, Paul is forced to go into hiding. Again we hear echoes of Athanasius's hagiography. Like Antony, Paul must leave behind his homeland and family. Of course, according to Jerome, all of this occurs even before Antony begins his journey into the desert. But what is of particular interest is, again, the ascetics' break from homeland and family—in other words, from space and identity. While Jerome does not belabor the details of this break, he does note an interesting anecdote that helps further our understanding of "breaking from the source," in Anzaldúan terms. First we are told that the persecutions are being "perpetrated in the lower part of the Thebaid" (4)—Paul's village. Paul leaves his home just after the death of his parents and stays in a "home at a considerable distance and secluded (*in villam remotiorem et secretiorem secessit*)" from his homeland. There the love and bonds of kinship conceal him. His newly married sister and her husband are entrusted with keeping Paul safe from the growing flames of the persecution.

Paul learns quickly that he is different from the company he keeps. The ties and bonds of an elite Roman family¹⁶⁹ prove incapable of concealing the difference between Paul and his kin. His brother-in-law, motivated by greed and a financial reward, decides to turn him over to the persecutors. Despite his wife's pleas not to do so, we learn from

¹⁶⁹ Paul's inherited wealth and his education (he was "highly skilled in both Greek and Egyptian learning," 4), suggest that his family was part of the Roman elite.

Jerome that “neither the tears of a wife (usually effective in such cases) nor the bond of kinship (*non communio sanguinis*)” (4) could keep Paul safe. So, he breaks away. Jerome hints at the difficulty of turning away from the bonds of kinship: “The young man had the tact to understand this, and, turning necessity into will (*necessitatem in voluntatem vertit*), and fled to the mountain wilds to await the end of the persecution” (5). Before he flees, Paul must first possess the intellect and understanding to change his will and leave his family behind. This, as in the *Life of Antony*, hints at *mestiza* consciousness, an (other) awareness of self which does not preclude “traditional” modes of knowing but still forces the knower to know anew. Armed with a change in his will, the desert ascetic is able to leave his family and embark on a journey toward a space that will further identify him—the desert. This is perhaps a doubling over of rejection. Paul is firstly rejected from the dominant culture because of his Christian beliefs during the threat of persecution. Then, he is again rejected when his own family chooses financial reward over the bonds of kin. The theme of rejection, found in Athanasius, and articulated by Anzaldua, is picked up in Jerome’s narrative. He hints at the depths of Paul’s withdrawal into the desert, telling us that he “began with easy stages, and repeated halts, to advance into the desert” until finally “at length he found a rocky mountain, at the foot of which, closed by a stone, was a cave of no great size” (5).

While his cave may be of no great size, readers learn again of the paradisaic qualities of desert space. Like Antony’s final desert dwelling, Paul’s first and only desert retreat is not an arid “ocean of sand” but a “large hall, open to the sky, but shaded by the wide-spread branches of an ancient palm.” Beneath the shade of the ancient palm Paul finds “a fountain of transparent clearness, the water whereof no sooner gushed forth than

the stream was swallowed up in a small opening of the same ground which gave it birth” (5). “These mountains,” Jerome tells us, offered Paul “many habitable places.” Jerome, clearly borrowing from Athanasius, preserves the model for desert ascetic space. The ecological descriptions lie in stark contrast to what is commonly understood by the notion of desert. Far from being an uninhabitable space furthering an ascetic imperative hinged on deprivation, lack, and discomfort writers like Athanasius and Jerome were interested in constructing a space that was not only habitable but also paradisaical and productive. Their deserts were productive of all kinds of ecological life and organisms—ancient palms, flowing springs—and they were also productive of the *mestizaje* of desert asceticism. It is incumbent on the other inhabitants of each of these deserts to assist in defining the spaces each author creatively imagined. Thus Athanasius’s demons give way to the nonhuman animal life of Jerome’s Egyptian desert.

After Paul finds a home in which to reside for the remainder of his life, readers are quickly moved forward to an aging one hundred and thirteen-year-old Paul. Simultaneously, the story also switches focus to the other, already well-known desert saint, Antony. The collapse of time in the service of narrative is not unlike Athanasius’s use of this rhetorical device in his hagiography. Jerome’s Antony learns of another desert *mestiza* when during “the stillness of the night it was revealed to him that there was farther in the desert a much better man than he, and that he ought to go and visit him.” Without guidance or hesitation, Antony embarks on a journey to find this “better man than he.” After several aimless, grueling hours of sun-scorched travel in the desert, Antony (no young man himself at the age of ninety) reminds himself—and us—of his faith in God and his journey. He says, “I believe in my God: some time or other he will

show me the fellow servant whom he promised me.” Immediately following his prayerful proclamation Jerome tells us that Antony

at once beholds a creature of mingled shape, half horse half man, called by the poets hippocentaur. At the sight of this he arms himself by making on his forehead the sign of salvation, and then exclaims, “Hello! Where in these parts is a servant of God living?” The monster after gnashing out some kind of barbarous utterance, in words broken rather than spoken through his bristling lips, at length finds a friendly mode of communication, and extending his right hand points out the way desired (*VP* 7).

The centaur—half man, half horse—is the very emblem of hybridity. Patricia Cox Miller has discussed the curious figure of the centaur in Jerome’s hagiography of the first desert saint as “[a] hybrid figure...carr[ying] both idyllic and barbaric connotations and functioning as a marker of a ‘wildness’ that was fundamental to ascetic identity and also to the role of the desert in the development of Christian anthropology.”¹⁷⁰ Miller explains how this image of the hybrid creature in Jerome’s desert is a direct reflection of the author’s view of the ascetic self. Hybridity then is a stock characteristic of late ancient ascetic identity. Furthermore, the landscape is fundamental to this hybridity, because like the demons and fellow ascetics in Athanasius’s hagiography, they inhabit this space. Again, Belden Lane’s use of Pierre Hadot’s concepts of *habitus* is relevant here. The animals in Jerome’s text function because they are associated with the desert in the socialized memory of late antique Christians. This association with the desert as a place where such creatures can exist, as Jerome claims, becomes the apt space to construct the desert ascetic as a hybrid figure, because here too, such creatures can exist.

Building on classicist Page duBois’s work on centaurs, Miller notes the important symbolism behind the iconic figures in antiquity.

¹⁷⁰ Miller, “Jerome’s Centaur,” 209-233.

[Centaur] were connected by analogy with barbarians as the “other” through which properly civilized individuals knew themselves to be such. In other words, as figurations of wildness and animal appetite, centaurs were opposed to culture—and yet, it is important to emphasize, it was only through them that civilized society recognized itself as civilized. Centaurs were a strange mixture of the animal and the human, of bestiality and civilization; negatively, they figured not only a literal “other” but also an intimate other, the wildness within the human.¹⁷¹

This creature of the desert, this late-ancient *mestiza* enters the narrative abruptly and almost violently with its “monstrous” appearance and “barbarous” speech (7). But fear and confusion give way to “friendly communication” and comprehension. The centaur’s wild tongue and broken speech need not be tamed in order for Antony to gain the knowledge necessary in order to proceed with his journey.

Anzaldúa notes the movement between cultures as well as the simultaneous occupation of each cultural space that defines the *mestizo*:

Because I, a *mestiza*,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuarto,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan
*simultáneamente.*¹⁷²

Here again, fear and confusion, and for Anzaldúa also contradiction, give way to comprehension. While Anzaldúa notes the confusion and contradiction that is associated with being a borderland creature, she also recognizes that a *mestiza* consciousness allows one to make sense of the confusion. Antony’s journey is articulated by Anzaldúa’s thoughts on the movement toward *mestiza* consciousness. She metaphorically notes that this confusion is like standing on one side of a riverbank shouting questions at the opposite side. She writes, “At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will

¹⁷¹ Miller, “Jerome’s Centaur,” 218.

¹⁷² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 99.

have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes.”¹⁷³ She simultaneously captures the notions of journeying, pilgrimage, movement, embodiment of the animal and identity, which Jerome is creatively constructing for desert asceticism.¹⁷⁴

Leaving the centaur behind, it is not long before Antony encounters another denizen of the Egyptian desert—a satyr or “a dwarf, whose nostrils were joined together, with horns growing out of his forehead, and with the legs and feet of a goat” (8). Antony again approaches the creature with both fear and steadfast determination. And again fear is allayed. The satyr reaches out to offer Antony dates as nourishment for his long journey. Antony asks the satyr what he is and is told, “I am a mortal being and one of those inhabitants of the desert... (*et unus ex accolis eremi*).” Antony also learns that he is a Christian, which brings tears to his eyes and sends him into a diatribe against the polis. But before he launches into his anti-urban polemic, Antony marvels at the fact that he can understand the satyr: “[Antony] rejoiced over the Glory of Christ and the destruction of Satan, and marveling all the while that he could understand the Satyr’s language (*simulque admirans, quod ejus posset intelligere sermonem*)(8).” Burrus has noted the curiousness of this interaction. She queries, “Do Antony and the homunculus, then, speak with the same tongue? Are they ‘brothers’? If the appearance of the stereotypically randy figure of the satyr in an ascetic text is itself sufficiently astonishing, the implications of this friendly exchange are almost unthinkable.”¹⁷⁵ Astonishing and unthinkable indeed,

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁷⁴ See also, María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

¹⁷⁵ Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints*, 29.

but if we linger here in this unthinkable space, this shocking, conflicting, colliding space, this space capable of producing *un choque*, we can see that Burrus's suggestive question pushes us to think the unthinkable and perceive the transformation occurring within Jerome's text. As Jerome's desert opens up for his readers we meet talking animals, which the writer attributes to the space he is creating. The desert, he informs us, is "typically capable of engendering monsters (*monstruosorum animalium ferax*)" (7). The satyr is at once hybrid, monstrous, *mestiza*, and *brother* to Antony. The fecundity of the desert has given birth not only to these monstrous creatures, but likewise to the desert ascetic. Anzaldúa remarks on the production of such hybridity. She writes, "[L]a *mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?"¹⁷⁶ As Antony marvels at the "transfer of the cultural and spiritual values" between himself and the homunculus, he does so in contradiction to the non-Christian citizens of Alexandria, proclaiming "woe" onto them. To which collectivity does the son of the desert listen?

Not unlike Anzaldúa's *awakening* and "entering into the serpent," Antony's encounters with the creatures of the desert are a process toward *mestiza* consciousness. For Anzaldúa it is the beginning of her forty-year long journey in which she learns her body, learns her power—her *tono*—and erodes the tenuous boundary between animal and human subjectivities. She is importantly aware of the historical embeddedness of the

¹⁷⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 100.

pairing of *mestizaje* and animality.¹⁷⁷ And thus, she appears to employ what postcolonial theorist Neel Ahuja calls the “*animal mask*.” He writes:

In our supposedly postracial moment, an ironic stance provisionally embracing animality is actually a common strategy for disentangling race and species in this context. I call this strategy, which appropriates the rhetoric of animalization to reveal its ongoing racial, neocolonial, or ecological legacies, the *animal mask*. By ironically appropriating an animal guise, the performer unveils a historical logic of animalization inherent in processes of racial subjection. The performance of the *animal mask* does not necessarily entail identification with nonhuman species, but it always points to the historical conjunctions of social difference and species discourse.¹⁷⁸

Anzaldúa’s scaled body and snake eyes certainly point to “the historical conjunctions of social difference and species discourse;” yet her appropriation of the rhetoric of animalization does not seem predominately ironic. Anzaldúa’s *animal mask* is in fact less a mask and more an embodiment of the animal. This embodiment is key to her concept of hybrid subjectivity, which expresses a new and different knowledge gained only through the processes of racial subjection and *only* within the space of the borderlands. This is a strategy for understanding identity, and it is one which can be perceived in Jerome’s own work. Thus, more than an animal mask which can be discarded at the moment of revelation of a truly human constituted self—thereby reinscribing a speciated divide—the embodiment of the animal is a moment of revelation of the *mestiza* self. Ahuja’s animal masks concept is important for understanding postcolonial spaces and identities. Likewise, Anzaldúa’s refusal of the mask in favor of embodiment is important for understanding borderland identities and spaces—hinged on multiplicities, hybridities, and instabilities. This hybrid, *mestiza* self is being forged in Jerome’s hagiography and in

¹⁷⁷ I am thinking here for example, of the colonialist imperatives to discern the humanity/animality of the colonized and thereby determine levels of cognition and spiritual recognition.

¹⁷⁸ Neel Ahuja, “Postcolonial Critique in a Multispecies World,” in *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 558.

other contemporaneous texts as part of the milieu of the fourth- and fifth-century Mediterranean culture.

Antony's next and last guide is a female wolf whom he spots in the distance and sets off to follow. She will eventually lead him to the dwelling of the man he seeks, but not before she leads him on a chase.

He saw a she-wolf gasping with parching thirst and creeping to the foot of the mountain. He followed it with his eyes; and after the beast had disappeared in a cave he drew near...with halting step and bated breath he entered, carefully feeling his way; he advanced little by little and repeatedly listened for the sound. At length through the fearful midnight darkness a light appeared in the distance. In his eager haste he struck his foot against a stone and roused the echoes; whereupon the blessed Paul closed the open door and made it fast with a bar (*VP* 9).

The scene as Jerome describes it is one in which Antony mimes the movements of the wolf. By depicting Antony following her step-by-step, Jerome heightens the mirroring qualities of his desert. The wolf pants, parched from thirst. Antony pants, from desire. She moves quickly and easily. He follows. Darkness casts itself deeply over the desert scene and still she moves with ease. Somehow Antony, fast on her heels, moves equally quickly. His senses now heightened from the chase, he feels his way and listens through the shadow of night. Finally she leads Antony—still parched and panting, like her, we may imagine—to the home of the man whom he has sought so long and hard. However, Antony is shut out and barred from entrance. He begins to cry and scream. ““Who I am, when, and why I have come, you know. I know I am not worthy to look upon you, yet unless I see you I will not go away. You welcome beasts, why not a man? I asked and I have found. I knock that it may be opened to me. But if I do not succeed, I will die here on your threshold. You will surely bury me when I am dead.’ Such was his constant cry, unmoved he stood.”

Antony sits outside of the cave, howling with tears. *Oye como ladra!* Hear him bark! He refuses not to be heard. He demands to know why Paul would admit a beast and not a human (*Qui bestias recipit, hominem cur repellis?*)(9). And then, when he becomes most vulnerable, when he is able to acknowledge his hybrid, animalistic, *mestiza* self, when words fail him and he is reduced to tears (which will eventually be his entry ticket to Paul's dwelling), his journey has culminated. Paul opens the door and receives his disciple with a warm embrace and the "sacred kiss," noting that there is "no trickery in tears" (*nemo cum lacrymis calumniam facit*) (9).

Anzaldúa discusses the kind of shock Antony exhibits:

El choque de un alma atrapado entre el mundo del espíritu y el mundo de la técnica a veces la deja entullada. Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision.¹⁷⁹

As Antony's hybrid nature is slowly revealed through Jerome's words, it is only by way of the latter's animal characters—his desert's inhabitants—that this revelation, this "choque de un alma atrapado entre el mundo del espíritu y el mundo de la técnica, (collision of a soul trapped in between the world of the spirit and the world of culture)" could be and indeed is made. The kind of shock Anzaldúa suggests is born of self-discovery, but also of desire. Eroticism has been shown to be a stock trait of ancient hagiography.¹⁸⁰ It is no coincidence then that the three creatures Antony has encountered thus far in his journey toward his ascetic master are all animals charged with erotic

¹⁷⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 100.

¹⁸⁰ So Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints*.

symbolism in antiquity.¹⁸¹ Likewise the character of Antony is charged with erotic symbolism. Antony's desires culminate not simply in the meeting of Paul, the man he has sought out from the moment he enters the text. Instead, the climax of his desires comes when he is simultaneously united with Paul and he has brought together "two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" within himself—the desert animal and the desert ascetic.

As Paul greets his new disciple with a warm embrace and sacred kiss, he also points toward the new identity Antony has recently embodied. He queries Antony, "How fares the human race (*humanum genus*)? Are new homes springing up in the ancient cities (*antiquis urbibus*)" (9)? The signification is pregnant with implications. First, as Virginia Burrus has argued, Paul's seemingly innocuous question regarding the *humanum genus* makes a distinction: it distinguishes Paul from the rest of the human race, but perhaps it is equally suggestive of Antony's new identity. Burrus writes:

The nearly comical question calls attention to a distinction that has become quite unstable—*genus, Geschlecht, Geschlecht* that is human. What is the human race to one soon to become dust, in a desert populated with monstrous hybrids? What is the human race to a couple of old saints sharing a simple meal—a loaf delivered by a bird, in fact!—in the brief interval of time that remains before the one will die and the other will bury him?¹⁸²

Second, the distinction is one in which the space of the desert plays a primary role. Paul's follow-up question regards innovation in the ancient cities. The question preserves a link between urbanity and humanity—a link which again shows desert asceticism to be outside of both. To extend Burrus's questions, what is a home to one

¹⁸¹ See Miller, Burrus, and Harvey for discussions regarding the erotically charged symbols of the centaur and satyr. Recently Charles Goldberg has discussed the erotic symbolism of the *lupa* in Jerome's hagiography. See Goldberg, "Jerome's She-Wolf," in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21 (2013): 625-628.

¹⁸² Virginia Burrus, "Wyschogrod's Hand," 418.

who has resided in the desert for so many years? The dissolving distinctions between the desert creatures are made possible as the desert space is simultaneously given the distinction of being a homeland.

Antony and Paul spend time together, sitting, conversing, discussing. We are told they sit on the edge of a “glassy spring (*vitrei fontis*)”(11),—reminiscent of the beautiful waters of Athanasius’s paradisaal desert in his *Life of Antony*. They marvel when a raven passes over them and brings them food—an entire loaf of bread! However their astonishment lies not in the aerial delivery (we learn that the delivery is a regularly scheduled one), but rather at the fact that the portion has doubled. According to Paul, “Christ has doubled his soldiers’ rations” (10). Thus, in Jerome’s desert, not only do creatures keep company with the desert ascetic, but they also contribute to keeping him sustained with some food. The raven functions as one of Paul’s sources of sustenance. We recall in the Athanasius’s *Life* that it was other ascetics and villagers who took on the responsibility of bringing food to their ascetic brother. Jerome continues to write Paul into a more solitary and distinctive life by describing the desert’s nonhuman creatures, those outside of the *humanum genus*, as his only companions and caregivers.

As they share each other’s company, Paul interrupts their conversation with a startling proclamation.

I knew long since, brother, that you were dwelling in those parts: long ago God promised you to me for a fellow-servant; but the time of my falling asleep now draws near; I have always longed to be dissolved and to be with Christ; my course is finished, and there remains for me a crown of righteousness. Therefore you have been sent by the Lord to lay my poor body in the ground, yea to return earth to earth (11).

The teacher admits to his student that he was made aware of his existence long ago. An interesting assertion, since we know that Antony had only very recently been made aware

of Paul's. The older ascetic is more knowledgeable. And if he is being inscribed as wiser and saintlier, we must ask the question: what has he taught Antony? It is not clear through the narrative that Antony has learned anything from him at all. What Antony has learned has all been predicated on the nonhuman creatures he encounters on his way to Paul.

It seems that Antony wishes to follow his newly found teacher, even to his own death. He is admonished by Paul who praises his desires to "lay aside the burden of flesh," but reminds him that this death is a reward to be given to the older ascetic, not to the student. Antony must seek his own death, but not until after he has had the opportunity to have students of his own. "It is expedient," Paul tells him, "that the rest of the brethren be trained by your example" (12). Jerome has set the stage for Paul's exit from the narrative only shortly after his entrance into it. But perhaps he has also been making clear all along this journey, that the other nonhuman creatures—the other desert *mestizas*—are equally an important focus of this *Life*.

Paul commands Antony to retrieve the cloak that was given to him by Athanasius in order that he might wrap Paul's deceased body in it and lay him to rest. Antony sets off to retrieve the cloak and hurries home to his monastery. When he arrives, two younger monks who have been attending him in his older age greet him. They ask where he has been, to which Antony replies, "Woe to me a sinner! I do not deserve the name of monk. I have seen Elias, I have seen John in the desert, and I have really seen Paul in Paradise" (13). Antony denounces his worthiness as monk and he does do within the walls of the monastery. If a monk is not one who dwells within the space of the monastery, then what is he? Again the narrative collapses space and time and alludes to biblical typologies.

Elias and John are in the desert, but what the biblical motif has called desert Antony has seen with his own eyes as a paradise. He grabs the cloak and hastens back to Paul, to paradise, “longing for him alone, thirsting to see him, having eyes and thought for none but him” (14). Jerome tells how quickly Antony hastens toward Paul fearing that Paul may die before Antony reaches him. The urgency in Antony’s movements is palpable to readers. Antony “traversed the rest of the distance at such speed that he flew along like a bird” (15). Flying like a bird, like the ones that nourished his teacher, he hurries to be nourished by him. His mind and movements are directed to and focused on Paul alone. Alas, Antony has a vision of Paul in white robes ascending toward heaven. When he finally reaches the ascetic, his fears are confirmed; his vision had been accurate. Paul has died and his body remains in the praying position left there for Antony to bury.

Unable to bury him on his own, Antony contemplates the options left him. If he returns to the monastery in order to obtain the tools necessary to dig a grave for his beloved, it will take him four days. Instead another thought occurs to Antony: “If I stay here I shall do no good. I will die then, as is fitting, beside your warrior, O Christ, and will quickly breathe my last breath” (16). Jerome moves quickly past this declaration, but if we pause for a moment to consider the implications of it we can see its poignancy and relevance for the desert *mestiza*. Antony has traveled back and forth in the narrative and here, as it draws to a close with the death of his teacher, his own mortality wavers precariously. He has already asked to die with his teacher—a request, we remember, that is denied him as soon as he makes it. Now, however, he sees that his place in this life is to occupy the space immediately next to the older ascetic’s remains. Remaining here, Antony would die in close proximity to his teacher, both eventually dissolving into

skeletal remains and becoming parts of the land on which they remain. But what more could he learn from his teacher? Why would remaining close to him be important? The text does not reveal answers to these questions.¹⁸³

Yet consider the spatial implications of such an offer. If Antony remains in the cave formerly occupied by Paul, then he remains in a different part of the desert, a space that he had not known until now. And he does so with the material remains of his teacher in the discipline. Jerome has constructed this space in the desert as one of becoming. It is the place in which Antony becomes a desert *mestiza* and knows anew. Still, it is not a space in which he must remain. The *metiza* consciousness is translatable to other places. Borderland spaces allow new epistemologies, new ways of knowing, but they are not contingent on remaining. In fact, as the previous chapter suggests, they are often articulated through the creation of a home—what/wherever that home is. So Antony need not remain here. And once again, nonhuman creatures enter the scene, reminding us at once that we are in the desert still, and of the animality of desert *mestizaje*:

While he turned these things over in his mind, behold, two lions from the recesses of the desert with manes flying on their necks came rushing along. At first he was horrified at the sight, but again turning his thoughts to God, he waited without alarm, as though they were doves that he saw. They came straight to the corpse of the blessed old man and there stopped, fawned upon it and lay down at its feet, roaring aloud as if to make it known that they were mourning in the only way possible to them. Then they began to paw the ground close by, and vie with one another in excavating the sand, until they dug out a place just large enough to hold a man (16).

The lions come to Antony's rescue, perhaps to his disappointment. They assist in the ritual of burial, taking on the task that he could not. And while the strength and

¹⁸³ There is of course an established practice of venerating holy figures by remaining close to their bodily remains or burial places. See Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

materiality of their bodies far exceeds his in size and vigor, they are one and the same—
desert *mestizas* seeking similar ends. Jerome tells us,

And immediately, as if demanding a reward for their work, pricking up their ears while they lowered their heads, they came to Antony and began to lick his hands and feet. He perceived that they were begging a blessing from him, and at once with an outburst of praise to Christ that even dumb animals felt His divinity, he said, “Lord, without whose command not a leaf drops from the tree, not a sparrow falls to the ground, grant them what you know to be best.” Then he waved his hand and bade them depart.

Antony finishes the job of burying the deceased ascetic. He lifts him, places him in the ground, and pushes the dirt over his body, covering him, mourning him and, finally, leaving him.

Conclusion

Jerome’s desert is abundantly populated with hybrid animals, familiar and new. Miller has already suggested Jerome’s use of the centaur as a symbol for ascetic identity. Furthermore she gestures toward his use of the desert imaginary as a means for the production of such hybrid identities. Thus, “if the centaur is seen as a picture of human identity that conveys an ascetic sensibility, it is the *prominence of the animal* that is most striking...in his *Life of Saint Paul*, Jerome, writing during a time in his life when his own ascetic experience of the body was very much on his mind, it is a ‘wild man’ with an accentuated animal nature that points the way to the founder of asceticism.”¹⁸⁴ I would further suggest that *all* of the desert creatures play this symbolic function for Jerome, and that therefore the desert becomes a vital space (perhaps *the* space) teeming with animal life—ascetic and otherwise.

¹⁸⁴ Miller, “Jerome’s Centaur,” 229. Emphasis mine.

In the frontier zone of the desert, as Jerome depicts it, the lines drawn so strongly between truth and falsehood, man and monster, human and beast, begin to blur. In the process, a potent new source of authority emerges—the *mestiza*, the desert ascetic, breaking out of silence with wild tongue. Furthermore, as Andrew Cain has described, Jerome places himself at the center of this newfound authority.¹⁸⁵ Having served his own time in the desert, Jerome pens a tale of the first desert ascetic, while inscribing himself into the narrative.

As Antony travels Jerome's desert he is continuously the recipient of unusual encounters. He meets half-human creatures, one capable of speaking and who identifies as a Christian, and others that are seemingly invested in the care of the desert ascetic. My argument has been that these creatures not only reflect the desert ascetic but are also inscribed as familial to desert ascetics. Like the community in Athanasius's desert, Jerome's animals are the new ascetic family. They contribute to that same relationality found in *The Life of Antony*—they care for each other, protect each other, and depend on each other. These animals, human and nonhuman alike, point to the *mestizaje* of desert asceticism.

As Gloria Anzaldúa enters the serpent to come to her own *mestiza* consciousness, so Antony has come as well into the centaur, into the homunculus, into the she-wolf, in order to meet the same ends. Jerome's Egyptian desert, like Anzaldúa's borderlands, gives birth to *mestizaje*, where dualisms are undone. As Anzaldúa puts it:

The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images of her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white

¹⁸⁵ Andrew Cain, "Vox Clamantis in Deserto: Rhetoric, Reproach, and the Forging of Ascetic Authority in Jerome's Letters from the Syrian Desert," in *Journal of Theological Studies* 57 (October, 2006): 500-525.

race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts...collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.¹⁸⁶

One could add human/nonhuman to the list of dualities which *mestiza* consciousness transcends. As the line between human and nonhuman fades into obscurity the *mestiza* identity comes into stark relief. While Anzaldua's vision may now strike us as idealistic in the extreme, for many borderland dwellers a *mestiza* consciousness remains still a tactic of survival and a means to a livable life. Jerome might have hoped to appropriate the authority of the saint whom he summoned, leaving the monsters in the desert that he himself had already fled. Yet the wild tongue of the beast may still be heard to bark and howl, if we know how to listen.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 80.

CHAPTER 4

THE HOLY HARLOTRY OF *MESTIZAJE*

One reason I kept the spirituality down is because it was so connected to the sexual, to the physical... When I started opening up to the body, the spiritual thing came out too because it was really connected with the body and sexuality.

-Gloria Anzaldúa, "Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Body," *An Interview with Linda Smuckler*

Of the three hagiographies considered in this study, the *Life of Mary of Egypt* refers most often to specific places: Alexandria, Jerusalem, the Jordan River, the Church of John the Baptist, as well as to spaces without proper names—a church courtyard, a church, a dried up streambed, the desert. These references work in unison to depict borderland spaces. The descriptions of spaces in this narrative are vivid and potent. I argue that as in the *Lives* of Antony and Paul, these spaces are productive of *mestiza* identity, or desert asceticism. That is, similar to the *Lives* of Antony and Paul, Sophronius's hagiography of the so-called "harlot" saint, is articulated via the spatial cues of the text. In this *Life*, however, the author has relied even more on the spatial descriptions than on the inhabitants who help make the space, inhabitants such as Athanasius's demons or Jerome's hybrid creatures.

The *Life of Mary of Egypt* is also an example of Christian hagiography struggling to articulate a "master principle."¹⁸⁷ Patricia Cox Miller describes the master principle as that element of female hagiography which is articulated through seemingly incongruous

¹⁸⁷ I am borrowing this phrase from Patricia Cox Miller who borrows it from Geoffrey Harpham in order to show how narrative relies on paradoxical concepts such as depicting the grotesque, or in my argument *mestizaje*, in order to articulate a saintly identity. See Miller, "Is There a Harlot in this Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque," in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003): 419-435 and Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

elements: “While intimating that a truly female, because fully sexual, woman can carry the designation ‘holy,’ [female hagiographies] founder on the difficulties involved on conceptualizing female *eros* in religious terms without tainting it with excess.”¹⁸⁸ The quote from Anzaldúa above indicates a similar goal in articulating a master principle. She is attuned to the ways in which the spiritual and the sexual are connected. Instead of seeing the two in opposition to each other, Anzaldúa describes their strong connection to each other and with her body.

Like the other two hagiographical texts discussed in this work, the *Life of Mary of Egypt* is a travel narrative. And like at least one of its predecessors, it is a text in which a student seeks out a master of the discipline. As the narrative unfolds, readers will note resonances with some recurring Anzaldúan tropes already discussed, such as “breaking away from the source.” In the *Life of Mary*, this break is an important and formative one, made more evident by the inclusion of a second character who must also “break away from the source.” Unlike Jerome’s hagiography of Paul, in which the overshadowing figure of Antony appears without any detailed account of the great ascetic’s life (probably because it would have been so well known), the narrative of Mary’s life is preceded by the recounting of her student Zosimas’s own story. Thus, several themes are doubly inscribed: Zosimas like Mary must make a break with the past, both Mary and Zosimas find mothers, and both, like all desert *mestizas*, will find in the hagiographer’s desert a space that is a homeland.

Unique to Mary’s story is the narrative of unrestrained eroticism that transforms a devotion to sex into a divine devotion no less erotic.¹⁸⁹ While prior scholars such as

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 428.

¹⁸⁹ See Virginia Burrus, *Sex Live of Saints*, especially 147-59.

Benedicta Ward and Lynda Coon have argued for a narrative of conversion and redemption, here again I build on the arguments of Virginia Burrus and Miller, who have more recently argued that the *Life of Mary* depicts an abundant eroticism that is not eliminated by the process of conversion. Rather, both these scholars show how late ancient hagiography is adaptive enough to describe not a repressed eroticism, but a celebrated one. Or perhaps better, hagiography is capable of retaining both seemingly contradictory strains in tandem, working in unison to construct the queer, hybrid creature of desert *mestizaje*. Taking these more recent descriptions of the *Life of Mary of Egypt* very seriously, I will again be using Gloria Anzaldúa's theories of borderland space to show that the spaces in the *Life of Mary of Egypt* are all conducive to constructing the desert saint and the desert space simultaneously.

More recently, Connie Scarborough has looked critically at the depiction of space in the thirteenth-century Spanish poem the *Vida de Santa María Egipcíaca*.¹⁹⁰ While the poem is from a much later date, the narrative stays very close to Sophronius's hagiography from some six centuries earlier. What is of particular importance for my own study is Scarborough's attention to the description of desert space. She writes, "In his descriptions of the desert, the poet of the *VSME* creates a dialectical tension between two simultaneous and intersecting planes of interpretation—the desert as natural reality and as a figurative space of exile, suffering, or temptation."¹⁹¹ While she never argues for it explicitly, what Scarborough describes in this later version of the *Life of Mary of Egypt*, is close to borderland space—a third option for space other than real or imagined. Still, Scarborough is tied to a narrative of conversion and redemption. And according to her, it

¹⁹⁰ Connie Scarborough, *Inscribing the Environment: Ecocritical Approaches to Medieval Spanish Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

is the complex understanding and construction of space that makes the transformation possible. “The desert...is the primary setting for events in the poem and essential for Mary’s transformation from sinner to saint. The desert functions as both geographic space and metaphor for repentance.”¹⁹² It becomes clear that for Scarborough the realities of the desert imaginary—with all of its harsh wildness—are at play in her interpretation of the desert’s power to redeem and convert the sinner to a saint. So like other scholars before her, for Scarborough, this is a tale of sanctity at the cost of repressing *eros* rather than holiness hinged on unrepentant seductiveness.¹⁹³

Like Jerome’s *Life of Paul*, the *Life of Mary* details rejection that is instrumental to its construction of a saintly life. However, the theme of rejection plays a far larger role in this text than in the ones I have here discussed before it. Rejection is simultaneously creative and destructive. Furthermore, rejection helps readers see a more concrete function of space in the narrative. When Mary is rejected from a particular space, the *virgen/puta* (virgin/whore) dichotomy is most striking. This dichotomy as Anzaldúa explains it is troublesome for border people because of its dualistic nature. It is a dualism embraced by many, but for *mestizas* this dualism is confronted and undermined. Below, I will discuss this dichotomy as Anzaldúa explains it and apply it to the description of Mary in her *Life*.

The *Life*

From its very opening, the *Life of Mary of Egypt* pays tribute to its predecessors: Jerome’s *Life of Paul the Hermit* and Athanasius’s *Life of Antony*. While authorship of

¹⁹² Ibid., 26.

¹⁹³ Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints*, 13.

the text continues to be debated, this hagiography claims in its prologue to have been written by a St. Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem.¹⁹⁴ The text begins by explaining the reason for authorship: “And I, in writing the life of St. Mary of Egypt, am afraid to hide the works of God by silence. Remembering the misfortune threatened to the servant who hid his God-given talent in the earth, I am bound to pass on the holy account that has reached me” (*Life of Mary*, Prologue). Like Athanasius before him, the author of this *Life* invokes a familiar trope of hagiographic literature: hubristic humility. Oxymoronic as it may seem, this trope allowed the hagiographers of late antiquity to reconcile the flamboyance of writing with the austerity of their ascetic subjects—whom they hoped not only to describe, but also to emulate. Derek Krueger argues, “Late antique hagiography provided textual models for emulation and invited an audience to conform to the patterns of virtue narrated. While the body of these texts recounts the saint’s piety, the margins of these texts enact the authors’ piety.”¹⁹⁵ While Krueger gestures toward the rhetorical device of humility in ancient hagiography, he equally illumines how this trope made evident the strong connections between authors and their audiences. As in the two previous hagiographies discussed in this work, Sophronius has woven himself in and out of the narrative. The *Life of Mary of Egypt* continues in its performative prose: “And let no one think that I have had the audacity to write untruth or doubt this great marvel—may I never lie about holy things! If there do happen to be people who, after reading this record, do not believe it, may the Lord have mercy on them because, reflecting on the weakness of human nature, they consider impossible these wonderful things

¹⁹⁴ For a detailed discussion on the authorship and reception of the *Life of Mary*, see Paul Harvey, “‘A Traveler From an Antique Land’: Sources, Context, and Dissemination of the Hagiography of Mary the Egyptian,” in *Egypt, Israel, and the Ancient Mediterranean World: Studies in Honor of Donald B. Redford*, Gary Knoppers and Antoine Hirsch eds., (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 479-99.

¹⁹⁵ See Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 108.

accomplished by holy people.” Here we are reminded of Jerome’s account of the first desert saint. Jerome implores his readers in the middle of his account not to doubt his words, fantastical as they may seem, and Sophronius has asked us to do the same. As the narrator recedes into the background and the opening scene of Mary’s tale is set, more allusions to Jerome’s *Life of Paul* and Athanasius’s *Life of Antony* proliferate.

The opening scene describes a monk named Zosimas living in a monastery in Palestine. Like Jerome’s Antony, he will prove to be the main character in the life of another person, one wiser and saintlier than he. But first he must recognize the flaw in his notions of having achieved a perfected ascetic state, because a person more perfect than he exists. Thus the pedagogical paradigm laid out by Athanasius and elaborated by Jerome is again repeated in the *Life of Mary of Egypt*. Zosimas must yet learn to reach the perfected state he thought that he had already achieved, and can only do so by searching out his ascetic teacher. “Is there a monk on earth who can be of use to me and show me a kind of asceticism that I have not accomplished? Is there a man to be found in the desert who has surpassed me?” Zosimas wonders to himself. The question implicates space by its very utterance. Zosimas understands the power of the desert to forge ascetic subjectivities and therefore asks not simply about the person, but also about the space. As we will learn, the answer is yes, there is a person in the desert who has accomplished more than he, and she can only exist in a space that is as open and complex as she will prove to be.

Breaking from the Source, Again, and Again...

Like its predecessors, the *Life of Mary of Egypt* is comprised—in part—by a travel narrative. No sooner has Zosimas wondered to himself about his problematic state

of perfection than a voice from heaven speaks to him. “Zosimas, valiantly have you struggled, as far as this is within the power of man, valiantly have you gone through the ascetic course. But there is no man who has attained perfection.” The angelic apparition goes on to command Zosimas to leave; “Before you lie unknown struggles greater than those you have already accomplished. That you may know how many other ways lead to salvation, leave your native land (οἴκου τοῦ πατρὸς) like the renowned patriarch Abraham and go to the monastery by the River Jordan (*Life of Mary of Egypt*, 3).” But what is this native land, this οἶκος το πατρὸς, Zosimas is ordered to leave behind? And why is it necessary for him to depart from it?

Zosimas’s birthplace is difficult to pin down. We are given no references to his place or family of origin other than that he was taken from his parents’ arms as a child and left with the monastery in which he has resided for the past fifty-three years (3). Thus, in the absence of a family and birthplace, the text inscribes Zosimas as an ascetic from birth. His fellow ascetics are his family from the very beginning. So, unlike Antony or Paul, Zosimas does not leave behind a birthplace and family in the pursuit of the ascetic discipline. His own *tierra natal* is the monastery in which he has been raised and continues to live. Therefore he must make a break from the monastery in order to seek out a master of the discipline. He is told to leave his native land—which we can only take to mean the walls of the monastery—like Abraham before him, in order to begin the *true* ascetic life. So, we are told that Zosimas must leave in order to “learn the many other ways which lead to salvation” (3). Zosimas is not a product of city life, but rather desert life. Perhaps the problems anticipated by Athanasius’s Antony making the desert a city

are here demonstrated in Zosimas's inability to fulfill his ascetic desires in a desert rendered much more akin to the polis than a wild unknown.

Zosimas is instructed to travel to a monastery near the Jordan River and he dutifully adheres to this directive. The author makes a point to remind his readers "Zosimas did as he was told. He left the monastery in which he had lived from childhood," again suggesting the importance of his homeland and the difficulty in breaking away from it. Readers are given a glimpse of the remoteness of the new space to which Zosimas has traveled. It is a desert place (ἔρημος γὰρ ἦν ὁ τόπος) not only unvisited by people of the world but even unknown to them (ἀνεπιβατος δὲ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄγνωστος)(6). Once Zosimas reaches the Jordan River and the monastery located in this unknown, unvisited space, a curious interaction ensues. The head of the monastery to which Zosimas has come greets him as a guest and fellow monk, asking Zosimas where he comes from. As if comprehending that the voyage he is on is one that will inevitably define who he is, Zosimas erases his homeland from the text replying, "There is no need to speak about where I have come from, but I have come, father, seeking spiritual profit, for I have heard great things about your skill in leading souls to God (4)."

Zosimas spends time in his new home with his new family of ascetics. After "many days" there we learn the real reason God led Zosimas to the Jordanian monastery:

At the beginning of the Great Fast [on Forgiveness Sunday] the priest celebrated the holy Liturgy and all partook of the holy body and blood of Christ. After the Liturgy they went to the refectory and would eat a little lenten food. Then all gathered in church, and after praying earnestly with prostrations, the elders kissed one another and asked forgiveness. And each made a prostration to the abbot and asked his blessing and prayers for the struggle that lay before them. After this, the gates of the monastery were thrown open, and singing, "The Lord is my light and my Savior; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 26:1) and the rest of that psalm, all went out into the desert and crossed the River Jordan (7-8).

Adherence to the monastery's rule was cause for a new break (Zosimas's third). He and his ascetic brothers each wander off alone in different directions. Their rule was precise, as was the adherence to it by the monks:

After crossing the Jordan they all scattered far and wide in different directions. And this was the rule of life they had, and which they all observed—neither to talk to one another, nor to know how each one lived and fasted. If they did happen to catch sight of one another, they went to another part of the country, living alone (8).

The space of the desert is opened up for the readers of the text. As the reader imagines the life-giving source of the rushing Jordan River, its crossing signifies for Zosimas a different life given. Though an ascetic from birth, the ascetic life he has always known has been accompanied by the trappings of a quasi-traditional family life, albeit a different kind of family. Now, however, Zosimas is alone and the space of the desert defined by the walls and gates of the monastery (constructed for the purposes of being abandoned) give way to the vast openness of the desert—the “real” desert—the space that will construct and define the desert *mestiza*, the desert ascetic. So each monk travels alone and by obligation changes course should he bump into another. The desert continues to open up, swallowing Zosimas and taking the readers of this *Life* to a deepening abyss of possibility. “Zosimas did the same as all. And he went far, far into the desert...at night he rested wherever dusk overtook him. He began to walk again very early at dawn, never relaxing the pace of his movement. For, as he told us, he wished to go to the innermost part of the desert (ἐνδότερον ἔρημον)...he continued his journey rapidly as if he were hastening to reach some renowned and famous monastic abode (9).”

In the absence of geographic or topographic descriptions, readers are forced to rely on temporal and motor cues to grasp the magnitude of the movement through desert space. Zosimas has moved very quickly, from dusk to dawn, and for at least twenty days. The author of this *Life* has set the pace for Zosimas and one can imagine that the pace he has set is in keeping with Antony's run toward Paul's embrace. Perhaps panting and parched like Antony, and the wolf he chases, Zosimas moves quickly through the Transjordan desert. The only indication readers have of what he searches for is that he hoped "to find a holy father dwelling there (εὐρεῖν τινα Πατέρα)." We will soon learn that it is not a spiritual father Zosimas will find there, but a mother.

Unlike, the deserts of Jerome and Athanasius, Sophronius's desert is stark and desolate. Zosimas does not encounter any other creatures during the many days of his sojourn. The very first thing he sees in the innermost space of the desert is the very thing he has been seeking—his teacher—and Zosimas knows her almost immediately when he sees her. *Almost*, because he only briefly mistakes her for a demonic phantom—a thought that will come back to haunt him later, but he quickly realizes that the vision he perceives is no phantom but indeed a human. And just as quickly as he realizes his mistake, the vision he sees takes off running. "What he saw was a naked figure, whose body was black, as if tanned by the scorching sun. It had on its head hair white as wool. When Zosimas saw this, he was inspired with pleasure, and filled with joy at that incredible sight, he began to run in the direction that this creature he saw was heading" (10). Filled with joy and inspired with pleasure Zosimas is renewed in his pace and races toward the figure. We are again reminded of the emptiness of this desert and its effect on Zosimas's character. When he sees this creature of the desert, Zosimas rejoices for "all those days of

his desert sojourn he had never seen the shape or shadow of any kind of human being or of any animal...so he sought to find out who this creature was...hoping that he would become the witness or observer of some great marvel.” The desert is stark in its emptiness, and Zosimas has traveled long and deep into it. When he finally does apprehend something it is the exact thing he has been searching for. As we will come to learn, this creature of the desert is Mary of Egypt, the subject of this *Life*. Zosimas runs after her.

But as soon as she sees Zosimas coming toward her she runs from him. And still he chases after her. If we thought we had already come to the innermost part of the desert we are taken even deeper, as Mary “began to flee and run toward the innermost part of the desert (11).” Zosimas runs after her as quickly as possible and eventually is able to reach her. Zosimas questions her, “Why are you running away from this old and sinful man? *O servant of the true God, wait up for me whoever you are, in the name of God, for whose sake you dwell in this desert.*”¹⁹⁶ Who she is, what she is, he is uncertain, but he knows that whoever, whatever she is, is intrinsically bound up in the desert space and thus he can glimpse, at the very least, a part of her identity as a follower of the “true God.” Again, the author points to the aridity of land. As Mary and Zosimas run, we are told they cross “a place where a dry streambed had left its traces.” And as if this hint of ecological possibility is not enough, the author adds, “I do not think that a torrent ever existed there, (for how could a torrent appear in that land?), but the place happened to have such a setting.” Mary runs down into the streambed, a place where the landscape colludes with the person in marking the text with things that are but cannot be. As Zosimas runs through a river that is no longer and could never have been, he does so in

¹⁹⁶ Emphasis mine.

pursuit of what he has longed for: a father that is no longer and could never have been. And yet in the absence of both, each figure—saint and desert—prove to be in excess of their possibilities. Mary is more than a saint as she pushes at the limits of saintliness just as her desert pushes at the limits of its topography.

When he finally tires, Zosimas stops to rest at the bank of the dried, hollowed land and begins to wail as Mary stands on the opposite bank. A riverbed seems to have been violently carved into the landscape for no other purpose than to keep him from what he has so desperately longed for. He “shed tears upon tears and uttered lamentation upon lamentation, so that his wailing could be heard by anyone in the vicinity” (12). His tears remind us of Jerome’s Antony who similarly reveals his own *mestiza* self as he howls with tears outside Paul’s cave. But unlike Jerome’s desert there are no nonhuman guides, no paradisaic landmarks, to take him all the way back home.

Mary, it turns out, has been running from Zosimas out of shame. She has spent her years in the desert alone and unclothed. Her first visitor sends her into a panic when she realizes that her naked body is visible to him. Once they both come to a stop on opposite sides of the dried up river bank, she says to him, “Father Zosimas, forgive me in the name of the Lord; I cannot turn toward you and be seen by you face to face, for as you see I am a woman and I am naked (γυνή γάρ εἰμι, καὶ γυμνήν), and I am ashamed to have my body uncovered.” She couches her shame in a gendered difference claiming that her “feminine sinfulness” is on display for the male ascetic and asks him for his cloak in order that she may cover it up: “throw me the garment that you are wearing, so that with it I may cover my feminine sinfulness (ἁμαρτωλῶ γυναίω).” Her sinfulness is cast as bound up in her femininity and sexuality and, as we shall see, her saintliness will be

equally cast. Even before we can learn the tale of this desert wanderer, we are enticed by the material excesses already divulged—an excess of space in a desert that can seemingly only open greater and greater; an excess of flesh in an ascetic body that can only be so by its being completely revealed, and an excess of desire in an ascetic disciple who seeks out his teacher. And as her story is told, this overabundance of narrative will only continue to overflow, reminding us of Anzaldúa’s notion of identity being a river that must be contained in order to be named—its failure to be contained points to the fluidity of this space, this asceticism, this narrative, this *mestizaje*.

Zosimas does as she asks and throws her his cloak while averting his eyes. Mary covers herself up, or at least, “certain parts of her body that ought to be covered more than others (13).” More than either of its predecessors discussed in this work, the *Life of Mary of Egypt* is an ocular narrative. The spectacle of the naked desert *mestiza* fleeing from a yearning student colludes with the visually hollow nothingness of desert space and offers readers a narrative made dynamic by their power to see and to see what is being seen. Mary asks Zosimas, “Why father Zosimas, did you decide to look at a sinful woman? What did you wish to learn from me or see, so that you did not hesitate to put yourself to such trouble?” Her question signals the potency of visual stimulation and the precariousness of an ascetic life with its intentional focus of erotics onto the divine. But she also notes that Zosimas is in search of something to learn. She has already cast herself as the priest’s teacher. But the lesson must wait. Before they can even begin, they participate in the same performances of competitive reverence as Jerome’s Paul and Antony. “Zosimas knelt on the ground and asked to receive her blessing, according to the custom, while she insisted on doing obeisance to him. Both remained on the ground, each

one asking the blessing of the other. No other word could be heard from either of them, except ‘Give me your blessing.’ ” Instead of sitting on the edges of a glassy spring arguing over who will bless their food, like Antony and Paul, Zosimas and Mary argue on the dirt floor of a dried up riverbank. Again, Sophronius’s desert is even bleaker and more arid than those that have come before it.

Zosimas’s previous thoughts regarding this spiritual mother continue to haunt him. He is still not fully convinced that the being he is interacting with is a human being. And although the materiality of her body, naked and sun-scorched, has already been evoked, we along with Zosimas continue to question what exactly it is he has discovered so deep in the desert. As they squabble over who will offer whom a blessing, Mary finally says to Zosimas, “It is fitting for you to give a blessing and prayer, for you have been honored with the rank of priest and you have served at the holy altar for many years” (13). When she first calls him by name, the author informs us that fear filled Zosimas’s heart at the notion that the being knew his name without him giving it to her. But just as his fear began to wane, her knowledge of his life and rank as a priest only increased his fears. “Those words cast Zosimas into greater fear and anxiety, and the monk became terrified and bathed in sweat, sighed, and was unable to speak clearly.” Zosimas takes his cue from Mary and responds as if he too knows more about her than she has let on. “He said to her with gasping breath, ‘It is clear from your appearance, O spiritual mother (μητηρ πνευματικη), that you have long ago departed toward God, and have in great part mortified yourself to the world” (14). Her body indicates an ascetic life and again in keeping with the excesses of the text, this mortified ascetic body is furthermore a body that is no longer living, having long ago departed toward God. Still

Zosimas, fearing that possibility, continues to hope for a better one, thinking that this apparition might be a friendly, God-given one. He persists in bidding that she pray for him: since “grace is manifested not by official rank, but is usually indicated by spiritual attitudes, you should bless me for the sake of the Lord and pray for one who needs your help.” It is clear already that the pedagogical paradigm long established not only by previous hagiographers, but the long tradition of teachers and students throughout the history of education in Greece and Rome, is here upheld. And if this is indeed the case, the ascetic tradition here destabilizes the paradigm to a certain degree. Ecclesial offices and rank have no place and no meaning here in the desert. But the body does. It is, up to this point, all that Zosimas knows of his master and teacher. That she has mortified her body and that she resides in this space is enough to place her in the position to teach. Although they argue about who is worthy of blessing whom, we should recall that Mary’s first words to her student once she sees him face to face are, “What did you wish to learn from me?” Her words foreshadow that what is coming is a lesson but before we can begin the lesson the author of this *Life* must first continue to describe the precarious identity of the desert *mestiza*. Questions of his own still loom large in Zosimas’s mind; is this creature human, or some evil or benevolent spirit? Although we know the answer to this question—hagiographies being rarely written about malevolent spirits, after all—we continue with Zosimas to consider the spectacle of *mestiza* excess.

Mary yields to the desires of her inquiring disciple and blesses him. She then persists with her own unanswered questions, asking Zosimas, “Why did you come to see a sinful woman?” But then her mind begins to wander to another place, a place she knows well and yet can only speak of refracted through the lens of her current place. The

desert then becomes not only a space constitutive of desert *mestizaje*, but more important, it is a place from which to see all that is not made by that very same desert. “Tell me,” she implores, “how do the Christian people fare these days? How fare the kings? How are the affairs of the Church managed?” Her questions are evocative of Paul’s questions to Antony in Jerome’s narrative. But they also evoke an understanding of self that is differentiated. She is not unambiguously a member of the Christian race. *Here* both is and is not *there*. Her connections will be made clear to us as she progresses through her tale, but it is important to see that the holy mother uses her location deep in the abyss of the desert in order to further establish herself as something different from the Christian people of the city—subject to, and always in negotiations of power with, political and ecclesial authorities.

Zosimas appears to have very little concern with his teacher’s inquiries. His response is curt, informing her that, “Christ has granted stable peace to all (14).” He persists in asking her to bless him and again some negotiation over who has the authority to bless the other ensues. After agreeing again to bless him they both begin to pray. Zosimas however, is unable to concentrate on his own prayers. He is fixated on Mary and still attempting, it seems, to make sense of her existence—who, or what she is. As she prays, he is unable to follow her in her devotion. Her speech is low, inaudible, and to Zosimas, inarticulate. “Her voice was not heard to utter articulate (ἔναρθρος) sounds.” Like Jerome’s centaur, her monstrous, wild, *mestiza* tongue can neither be comprehended nor tamed. In a text which seems to be about excess, readers are again pushed beyond the limits. Mary begins to float “about one cubit above the earth, hanging in the air (15),” she continues to pray, unbroken in her own contemplative orations. Zosimas continues to be

described in terms of lack. He is just barely able to keep pace with her as he chases her, and now that he prays with her he is again unable to keep pace. Unable to make sense of her words, he grows impatient with her prolonged prayer. Eyes fixed on the ground Zosimas finally takes a peek at the aerial ascetic unbroken in her meditation. What he sees frightens him severely. The thought immediately enters Zosimas's mind that in fact his former suspicions were correct. The possibility that his guide in the desert is in fact a demonic spirit "only pretending to pray," occurs to him. The precarious boundary between the demonic and saintly is again opaquely drawn.

Inexplicably hearing his thoughts, Mary interrupts her own prayers to ask Zosimas, "Why father, do these thoughts about me disturb and torment you...? Be assured, my good man, that I am a sinful woman, but I am protected by baptism." Assuring Zosimas that she is not a demon, Mary then explains the materiality of her bodiliness in spatial terms that Zosimas and the readers of this text are certain to comprehend. She goes on to say, "I am not a spirit, but altogether earth and ashes and flesh (15)." Here the text cites *Genesis* 18:27 and *Sirach* 17:32, where each describes the material condition of humanity as earth (or dust) and ashes. But the author of this text has appended the word flesh, σὰρξ—an interesting and noteworthy addition for its conflation of biblical and ascetic understandings of the body. Noting her words and gestures (Mary makes the sign of the cross over various parts of her body), Zosimas is again comforted that his teacher is both alive and not evil.

A New Story

Now that readers have journeyed with Zosimas to the central character of this *Life*, we begin again. This *mestiza* has a tale to tell. Anzaldúa writes, “I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet” (103). But before we are treated to a new story, a new symbol for human existence, Mary must “overcome the tradition of silence,”¹⁹⁷ as Anzaldúa names it a tradition of silence that tells young girls that *en boca cerrada no entran moscas*. As Anzaldúa recalls:

“Flies don’t enter a closed mouth” is a saying I kept hearing when I was a child. Ser *habladora* was to be a gossip and a liar, to talk too much. *Muchachitas bien criadas*, well-bred girls don’t answer back...*Hocicon*, *repelona*, *chismosa*, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being *mal criada*. In my culture they are all words derogatory if applied to women—I’ve never heard them applied to men (76).

Zosimas, in the overly dramatic fashion of a student yearning to know, not simply a lesson from but also about his teacher, throws himself on the ground and begs to hear her tell him about herself.¹⁹⁸ As readers we sympathize with Zosimas’s antics. We have all journeyed with him for the promise of learning a “holy tale” and now on the verge of hearing it, he (and we) fear we may be denied it. Zosimas “clasped her feet, saying tearfully, ‘I implore you in the name of Christ our God...for whose sake you wear this nakedness, for whose sake you have worn out this flesh of yours in this way, do not conceal anything from your servant, who you are and where you came from and when and in what way you came to dwell in this desert (16).’” Her body, again a signification of

¹⁹⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 76. This is her subheading in her chapter on how to tame a wild tongue.

¹⁹⁸ See Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 143.

her identity, is invoked and her nakedness can only be the precursor to laying bare all of herself.

Indeed Mary tells him (and us), “Since you have seen my bare body, I shall lay bare to you all of my deeds (17).” Still, the pain of baring oneself, confessing oneself, is not equal to the spectacle of having already been seen bare. Mary makes clear that as she bares her soul she risks the possibility of loss: “I know that when I start telling you the story of my life, you will avoid me.” And yet, knowing the possibility of this loss, this rejection made possible only through abjection, she takes the risk.

Speaking herself becomes ultimately important as her student continuously probes her with his desires to know her. As Burrus observes, “The woman who has already pronounced herself shamed by her physical exposure, declares herself now also ashamed to speak her life. Yet she concedes...more, it would seem, for *his* benefit than for *hers*.”¹⁹⁹ Still there is a potential benefit for her too: speaking oneself and taking on the burden of speaking for the sake of another are difficult to disentangle in this particular narrative. This hope for the desert *mestiza* is vital. More than a mere figure for the satisfaction of Zosimas’s desiring ear—an insatiable and unquenchable desire at that—Mary speaks her life in the face of the risk of rupture, of loss, and thereby summons creativity, hope, and beauty. I believe this is what Patricia Cox Miller has determined as the grotesque within late ancient hagiography; the ability for two or more contradictory elements to be simultaneously affirmed. Like *mestizaje*, “The grotesque violates categories and threatens to de-center cultural norms.”²⁰⁰ Again, the hybrid genre of hagiography lends itself to hybrid ways of knowing—as with Anzaldúa’s *mestiza*

¹⁹⁹ Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 144.

²⁰⁰ Miller, “Harlot?” 429.

consciousness. Burrus hints at this conflation of listener and hearer and their implications for the *mestiza* subject:

Mary, however, seems to confess out of charity, because Zosimas *needs* her to, though in the end it is no longer clear who is confessing (to) whom. If Mary is a seducer who becomes an ascetic without ceasing to seduce, Zosimas is an ascetic who becomes a seducer without ceasing to be an ascetic. Perhaps God, who is invoked most often in this doubly confessional Life in passionate ejaculatory address, inheres in the very power of confession to draw, or seduce, transformation at the very point where what is verbalized becomes incarnated, even as flesh is simultaneously converted to the materiality of a text that we too are urged to “take and read.”²⁰¹

It is precisely this notion of text as enfleshed in the carnality of the ascetic—a “carnal excess”²⁰²—that points us in the direction of multiple strands of transcendence: space, subject, and text. And it is precisely these multiple strands that Anzaldúa coalesces into what *mestizaje* is—in all of its abundance.

Anzaldúa, then aptly describes the sensuality of speaking one’s existence. It is the basis of her *autohistoria* theory which conflates (auto)biography with personal and collective histories. And so here, at the beginning of this text, deep in the desert, deep in the text, we are reminded of the sensuality of textuality both in the words of the teacher and in Anzaldúa’s own words: “Picking out images from my soul’s eye, fishing for the right words to recreate the images. Words are blades of grass pushing past the obstacles, sprouting on the page; the spirit of the words moving in the body is as concrete as flesh and as palpable; the hunger to create is as substantial as fingers and hand.”²⁰³ So create she does.

²⁰¹ Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 146-47.

²⁰² See Virginia Burrus, “Carnal Excess: Flesh at the Limits of Imagination,” in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 (2009): 247-265.

²⁰³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 93.

Mary begins her story with a place. “My homeland, dear brother, was Egypt (18).” Again, a text that is simultaneously producing a space and a subject can only do so over and against other spaces and other subjects. She continues, explaining to her student that she rejected familial love and traveled to Alexandria. Interestingly the simultaneous constructions of space and subjectivity persist. She leaves her parents not for the arms of wanton lovers, but rather, for the arms of the wanton city. Readers and hearers of Mary’s *Life* would have been wise to the cue. Alexandria has by now become an important theme in Christian hagiography. In Mary’s *Life*, it is the place that welcomed her with open arms as she rejected her parents.

Mary continues to offer Zosimas every morsel of her delicious tale. And if she was hesitant at first to open up, as she tells her story her hesitance gives way to audacity. She tells Zosimas, “But now it is more decent for me to speak openly what I shall briefly describe, so that you may become aware of my lust and love of pleasure.” She describes her love of sexual pleasure and how she “had an insatiable passion and uncontrollable lust.” Although she rebuffs the notion that she was a prostitute and earned a living by trading on her sexuality, she still participates in the Alexandrian market place—in the “city of men”²⁰⁴—and has an understanding of the commodification of her sexuality and of her body. She explains, “I did not accept anything although men often wished to pay me. I simply contrived this so that I could seduce many more men, thus turning my lust into a free gift.” Although she entreats Zosimas to believe that she did not accept payment, she still understands her sexuality as something that can have a monetary value assigned to it and thus is apt to be given as a free gift, or even as payment.

²⁰⁴ Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 152.

Though Mary codes her love of pleasure in negative terms (an “insatiable passion and uncontrollable lust to wallow in filth”), Anzaldúa describes the pleasures of sex in much more positive and spiritual terms. She claims, “I feel I’m connected to something greater than myself like during orgasm: I disappear and am just this great pleasure wave, like I’m uniting myself in a way I have not been. In this union with the other person I lose my boundaries, my sense of self. Even if it’s just for a second, there’s a connection between my body and this other’s body, to her soul or spirit.”²⁰⁵ Similarly, as Miller remarks on the *Lives* of Mary and Pelagia she notes, “These women love sex, and in loving their sexuality they also value themselves, according to the late ancient code that identified women’s being with their sexuality. For a moment, beauty, desire, and femaleness are positively valued. Furthermore, as autonomous lovers they are free agents and as such they disrupt male norms of subjectivity.”²⁰⁶ Hagiography provides a space for this seeming contradiction to be held in tandem—not reconciling but still making meaning.

Mary continues by describing a particular incident in which she takes note of a throng of men from Egypt and Libya making their way toward the sea. She inquires about where these men are headed and she learns that they are traveling to Jerusalem for the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. Mary decides she wants to join them. She tells Zosimas, “I wanted to go away with them for this reason...so that I could have many lovers, ready to satisfy my lust (19).” This point in her tale draws out a very important spatial rendering as Mary makes clear her intentions. She has no wish to participate in the sacred festivities, and yet she makes the journey in order to have multiple lovers. The

²⁰⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, “Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Body: An Interview with Linda Suckler,” in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, AnaLouise Keating ed., 85.

²⁰⁶ Miller, “Horlot?,” 429.

ship then becomes a vessel for her erupting desire. She imagines herself in the close, tight quarters of the ship, and its day-to-day life is the perfect setting for her agenda. This “Mediterranean cruise,” as Virginia Burrus terms it, is exactly that. The boat then becomes a space for Mary’s pleasures to be satisfied. After admitting her desires she grows reticent, telling Zosimas, “Father Zosimas, do not force me to describe to you my disgrace.” But, as before, the desiring ear needs more and he begs his teacher to finish the lesson. And again, as before, she concedes. She says, “I saw some young men standing at the seashore, about ten or more, vigorous in their bodies as well as in their movements.” As the image of these strong-bodied men moving about vigorously comes into focus, so too does the image of Mary rushing toward them and literally disrupting their space. “I rushed shamelessly into their midst, as was my habit.” The space is potently gendered, with the muscular men moving about on the shore where the boat is docked. Other passengers fade into the narrative background as their arrivals are still awaited or some, we are told, are already on board. Mary stands there alone, among the men, pushing her way into their midst. It is indeed her habit to do so. Her signature move of rushing into a crowd is repeated later in the narrative. She demands that they take her along with them and assures them that they will find some use for her. She tells Zosimas, “Then, uttering other even more obscene words, I made everyone laugh, while they, seeing my penchant for shamelessness, took me and brought me to the boat they had prepared for the voyage.” Whatever the obscenities she uses to gain her passage onto the ship, neither Zosimas nor we are told. Mary causes a disturbance, for the men, for Zosimas’s wanton ear, and for us. She abruptly enters the space of these voyaging male pilgrims as they await their fellow voyagers. As they display vigor in their movements, she displays equal

vigor in her pronouncements of things said and later unsaid. The laughter is intriguing. What is the joke? Who is the joke? Who is in on it? Seemingly, Mary is being laughed at—she is the butt of her own joke—ostensibly because she has made clear her desires for pleasure and offered the men things unspeakable, however laughable they are. As she tells Zosimas, “How can I possibly describe to you what followed, my dear man? What tongue can declare, or what ears can bear to hear what happened on the boat during the journey?” (21)

But Mary has made good on her promise and in so doing has gained the last laugh. “There is no kind of licentiousness...that I did not teach those miserable men,” the teacher tells her student. Mary has a deep understanding of the earth and the land she inhabits. Anzaldúa contends that the sexual-spiritual female body is capable of having and maintaining this deeply rooted connection. She says, “We get these messages from nature, from the creative consciousness or whatever you want to call the intelligence of the universe. It’s constantly speaking to us but we don’t listen, we don’t look.”²⁰⁷ Mary similarly embodies this connection with and attempts to not listen, not look. She wonders aloud to Zosimas, “I am truly surprised, my father, how the sea endured my profligacy, and how the earth did not open its mouth to draw me alive down to Hades.” Having escaped the ever watchful sea and earth, she finally makes her way to another place, Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is a turning point in Mary’s Life. She explains to Zosimas that after having reached Jerusalem she stayed several days in the city before the feast and continued to engage in the “same practices as before or even worse.” She describes her antics as a hunt for “the souls of young men (22).” On the day of the feast Mary notices a

²⁰⁷ Anzaldúa, “Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Body,” 75.

crowd rushing toward the church. As is her habit, we know, Mary rushes along with them and enters the courtyard with them. Again she pushes her way through the crowd, invading the space of others and the sacred space of the church. Her aggression is met with equal aggression as she is pushed back. She tells Zosimas, “I tried to join the crowd and force my way to the entrance, pushing my way forward and being pushed back.” The vigorous movements of the crowd, pushing forward and backward while simultaneously moving closer to the entrance of the church, are evocative of her time on the boat. What is Mary’s goal by entering the church? While others are there to participate in scared festivities, she tells us that she is on the hunt. Is her goal to turn the enclosed space of the church into another pleasure cruise?

There is Great Fear in Going Home

Mary finally makes her way to the door of the church but is barred from entering “by some kind of divine power.” She tries continuously, in her forceful way, to get through. Pushing forward again and again, she is repeatedly pushed back. She attempts to use the brute strength of a mob, joining with the others and again pushing her way through. The others are able to pass the threshold but Mary finds herself being pushed by the divine force further and further back until she finds herself alone, in the courtyard of the church. All of the others in the crowd have made it over the threshold separating her from them. She says, “I assumed that this was happening because of my womanly weakness (γυναικείας ἀδυναμίας).” Are all of the others who have been able to pass men? The space of the sanctuary becomes another gendered space in her story. She can only comprehend her inability to penetrate as attributive of her “womanly weakness.” So

she steels herself and tries again, and again, and again. She is steadfast in her determination to enter the church where a crowd awaits her inside. Finally growing fatigued she settles into the realization that she alone is kept from entering the church. Alone she stands in the courtyard. Having exhausted herself repeatedly, as is her habit, she can no longer go on. Her “violent efforts (23)” have been met with equally violent efforts “as if a large company of soldiers (22)” were preventing her from entering. Mary recalls to Zosimas that standing in the corner of the courtyard, alone, exhausted in body and mind, “a salvific word touched the eyes (23)” of her heart. “I began to cry, lamenting and beating my breast, raising sighs from the depths of my heart.” We are glimpsing the risk of rejection Mary has taken by speaking her story. She tells Zosimas, “It was the filth of my actions that was barring the entrance to me.”

Through her tears Mary catches sight of an icon of “the all-holy Mother of God” just above her head where she is standing. She addresses the icon, “Virgin Lady, you who did give flesh to God the Word by birth...help me, a lone woman who has no one to help her.” She pleads with the Virgin, the Mother, to allow her entrance into the church where she might be able to venerate the cross where her son was “crucified in the flesh and offered His own blood as ransom” for her sake. And the triangulated parallels between herself, the Virgin mother, and the crucified Son are striking and potent images—not of redemption but of the inherent sacrifice in seduction.²⁰⁸ As Burrus has convincingly shown us, there is a “surpassing boldness of the ‘sin’ demanded of one who would attain the holiness of the harlot.”²⁰⁹ And this surpassing boldness is helpful in understanding the change Mary’s character decidedly makes to offer her seductive devotion to the “divine

²⁰⁸ Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints*, 155.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

cross” inside the walls of the church and not the many men who cannot now (nor ever have been able to) fulfill her needs. The question hanging above us, like the icon of the holy mother, is: what causes this change? It is not enough to claim that the divine force preventing her from entering the church was sufficient to arouse a fear in a deity that disapproved of her. Nor is it simply that she had for the first time been made aware of an abundant lust that queered her as an “outsider” from the social norms of fifth-century Mediterranean life. Rather it is the palpable rejection made manifest in a physical space that prevents her from entering a particular space that causes this shift. Up until now Mary has, with some vigor, moved into any and all spaces she desire—this is her habit, she tells us. And after her change, she will continue to move about freely and with equal vigor, in the wide-open space of the desert. But this rejection from the sacred space of the church is painful, life giving, and life changing.

Anzaldúa explains the choices made for a queer subject. They are ones that involve great pain coupled with great knowledge. She writes, “For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality.”²¹⁰ The choice to be sexual is, for some, the choice to “rebel” or to be countercultural. Lesbians of color doubly inscribe this rebellion by expressing not only their sexuality but also one directed toward same-gendered partners. And as she understands it, this counter cultural production is one in which religiosity and faith are inherent. “Being a lesbian raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I *made the choice to be queer* (for some it is genetically inherent.)”²¹¹ Being queer for Anzaldúa is something she can opt in and out of

²¹⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 41.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41, emphasis in original.

even if she simultaneously recognizes that this is not what being queer is for other individuals. But for all queers, or, at the very least, lesbians of color, there is a commonality in their countercultural embodiment. The commonalities are epistemological ones, to be sure, but they are also ones tied to the identity of a person. She goes on to say, “It’s an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts... It is a path of knowledge—one of knowing (and learning) the history of oppression of our *raza*. It is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality.”²¹² Mitigating dualities is an important part of *mestiza* life. And, as we shall see, Mary’s *Life* is one in which the main character is seen doing just that.

The rejection to which Mary is subject, the one that utterly shatters her and simultaneously constitutes her (is this not what the grotesque in female hagiography is doing) is closely associated with what Anzaldúa would call “fear of going home” or “homophobia.”²¹³ She explains that when she was a faculty member of a certain New England college, the presence of (very few) self-identified lesbian faculty members and students was causing some alarm amongst the “more conservative heterosexual students and faculty.”²¹⁴ A meeting was arranged between herself, another lesbian faculty member, two lesbian students, and a group of concerned students and faculty. Anzaldúa notes that when the term *homophobia* was raised, one of the concerned students stated that she had always thought the term referred to a fear of going home. Anzaldúa writes, “I thought, how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We’re afraid of being

²¹² Ibid. 41.

²¹³ Anzaldúa thus subtitles a section of her second chapter, *Borderlands*, 41.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 41-42.

abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us.”²¹⁵ She describes the fear of rejection in terms of the denial of the love of a mother.

Anzaldúa imagines three possible ways to escape rejection. First she suggests that, “to avoid rejection, some of us conform to values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. Which leaves only one fear—that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage.”²¹⁶ What she describes is life in the closet, with parts of oneself kept hidden from a *normativized* culture and society. She goes on to list a second route that entails becoming “conscious of the Shadow-Beast, star[ing] at the sexual lust and lust for power and destruction we see on its face,” and concluding that one of its (that is, the Shadow-Beast’s) features is a heteronormative male projection that inheres and upholds patriarchy. Finally she suggests a third option:

Yet still others of us take it another step: we try to waken the Shadow-Beast inside us. Not many jump at the chance to confront the Shadow-Beast in the mirror without flinching at her lidless serpent eyes, her cold uncanny moist hand dragging us underground, fangs bared and hissing. How does one put feathers on this particular serpent? But few of us have been lucky—on the face of the Shadow-Beast we have seen not lust but tenderness; on its face we have uncovered the lie.²¹⁷

But cannot lust and tenderness be closer to each other than Anzaldúa’s binary suggests? While none of these options is privileged in Anzaldúa’s thought, the latter resonates closely with the features of hagiography. And in the *Life of Mary of Egypt* we certainly see an awakening of the Shadow-Beast within—however, one in which lust and tenderness do not seem so far apart. Mary’s experience of transformation in the courtyard

²¹⁵ Ibid., 42.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 41-42.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 41-42.

of the church as she faces the Virgin Mother is not one that activates a quieting or repressing of this part of herself. Instead, as we have already seen and will continue to see, her life in the desert is one in which the Shadow-Beast of her own desire is at its most heightened state. Finally, the image of the Shadow-Beast as both a mirror of Mary's desires *and* as the Virgin Mother is apt for considering the virgin/whore dichotomy that *mestizaje* actively and persistently disrupts.

Anzaldúa explains the symbol of the Virgin Mary for Chicana/os. "Today, la *Virgen de Guadalupe* is the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered."²¹⁸ Anzaldúa further describes the importance of this symbol and its implications for the gender and sexuality of *mestizaje*. She does so by detailing the hybrid figuration of Guadalupe, the Virgin mother; *la Malinche*, the Aztec woman raped and kidnapped by Hernán Cortés and also considered a traitor by her people; and *la Llorona*, a mythical mother on an ongoing search for her lost children. Anzaldúa claims:

La gente Chicana tiene tres madres [The Chicana/o people have three mothers]. All three are mediators: *Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada* [the raped one] (*Malinche*), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *la Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two. Ambiguity surrounds the symbols of these three "Our Mothers." *Gudalupe* has been used by the Church to mete out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and *mexicanos* and Chicanos. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted—*Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the virgin/*puta* (whore) dichotomy.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 52-53.

Returning to Mary of Egypt, I suggest that Anzaldúa's claims regarding the complex relationship between the three mothers is useful for understanding Mary of Egypt. If she is indeed a reflection of the holy Mother(s), as I suggest, then Mary is consistently revealed as a desert *mestiza*. The virgin/whore dichotomy is undermined by her reflection in the holy icon and her immediate association with the holy intercessor.

Instead, of focusing on the *Life of Mary* as a conversion narrative, what I am suggesting is that the fear of rejection signaled at the beginning of Mary's tale, and which becomes all the more palpable at the height of her story, is ultimately important for rendering an ascetic subject. Rejection is scary, painful, shattering, and formative for Mary. Her rejection is anchored in a spatial understanding of where and how far a queer subject can push the limits of their counter-cultural movements simply by inhabiting space. And because of these aspects, her rejection from the church in Jerusalem is the turning point of the story.

Mary continues her tale to Zosimas, explaining the Virgin's response to her pleas. After promising the icon of the holy Mother that after looking upon the cross she "shall immediately renounce the world and all worldly things (23)," she then says that she will go wherever she is instructed or guided to go. She tells Zosimas that upon speaking these words she is immediately filled with the "fire of faith (24)" and she details for Zosimas how she proceeded from the place in which she stood into the church, no longer rejected from that space. "Thus I found myself inside the Holy of Holies, and I was deemed worthy to see the life-giving cross." She reveres the cross, kisses the ground before it, and rushes back out into the courtyard to speak again with the holy Virgin, "the place where the bond of guarantee was signed." Now outside of the church and again face to face with

the mirror, the Shadow-Beast, the hybrid Mother, she again pleads with the image. “Guide me now, wherever you command,” she asks it. Mary hears in the distance a shouting voice claiming, “If you cross the river Jordan, you shall find a place of repose” (25). The Jordan River again makes an appearance in this hagiography. We are reminded of the beginning when Zosimas is similarly told to leave his homeland and head to the monastery near the great river. Subsequently, he is told to cross this river in observance of the customs of his new home, only to find himself at the banks of a different river. It is a river that once was but could never have been, much like the teacher he finds there—another failed image of what once was, still no less a holy mother in her own right.

She is given three coins by someone, which she uses to buy three loaves of bread and she sets off “at a run” (26) toward the river. We remember that she is always running into new spaces. She stops along the way and asks for directions to the river, finally reaching the “church of John the Baptist, which was very near the River Jordan.” After spending the night in the church, she finds a boat on the edge of the great river and uses it to cross. We learn that she again appeals to the Virgin to lead her wherever she pleases, which is how she ends up in the desert. She then tells Zosimas, “Since then to this day I have fled afar off and lodged in this wilderness, waiting for my God who delivers those who return to him from distress of spirit and tempest (26).” The citation is of Psalm 54. And here it recalls Athanasius’s hagiography of a saint who “returns” to a home he had never seen before. Just so, Mary understands her movement into the desert space not as a movement away from something but as a return to something.

Zosimas presses on, asking her more questions about her time in the desert and what she has used as nourishment to survive. But more importantly he asks her, “Did you

live in this way for so many years without distress and without being disturbed by the sudden change in your way of life (27)?” She makes clear to him that the “change in her way of life” has not been without its distractions. She still fears them and therefore hesitates to even mention them. Memories of food, wine, and sex have repeatedly tormented her mind. But again, she confronts the Shadow-Beast head on, “In my mind I would stand in front of the icon of the Mother of God, my guarantor, and I would weep before her, asking her to chase away those thoughts that assailed my miserable soul in this way (28).” Mary struggles to find the words to go on, but Zosimas begs for more—as is his habit. “How can I describe to you, revered father, those thoughts that were urging me again to fornication (29)?” She does find the words and describes to him how she would throw herself on the ground whenever these thoughts entered her mind. She tried, like a most dutiful daughter, to remind herself of the promise she made to the holy Mother (to herself?) And just as borderland spaces are apt to do, they grate against each other, rupture, and bleed into one another. Mary in the desert is back in the church courtyard before the mirror icon. She tells Zosimas, “I constantly raised the eyes of my mind toward my guarantor, seeking her help for one who was in danger of drowning in the sea of desert.” Is she back at sea, in the church courtyard, or in the desert? The narrative spaces collapse in on each other depicting the precariousness of borders, and still she is rooted in the sands of the desert beneath her, because they are her. We recall her words, “I am not a spirit, but altogether earth and ashes and flesh (15).”

She finishes her tale by describing to Zosimas how “the power of God preserved (30)” her soul and body, rescuing her from the evils of her own mind. To be sure, she makes clear to Zosimas that her time spent in the desert has been lonely. No demons, no

creatures, whether human or nonhuman, have disturbed her. Only the thoughts of her own mind have kept her company. She cites scripture, causing Zosimas to marvel because she has made clear to him that she is illiterate and has had no opportunity to learn such things. Her knowledge, as Burrus tells us, comes from her “long years of desert training.”²²⁰

She caps off her tale by again asking her student to pray for her and then telling him to return to the monastery where he came from. They plan to meet again the following year and she instructs him not to tell her tale to anyone until she has died. For the time being her tale is for Zosimas’s ears only and he more than happily obliges to keep the tale to himself. She instructs him further not to cross the Jordan River the following year when the time comes to do so. Instead she wishes to come to meet him on the bank of the river “near the inhabited area (32)” The river as a place for their second meeting is contrasted with the dry riverbed where they have remained for the duration of her tale, as is the inhabited land and Mary’s desert. It is the emptiness of desert space that gives rise to the desert saint. Yet she wishes to meet Zosimas at her prescribed location in order to receive communion which she has not since her time spent in the church of John the Baptist before she crossed the river. And she tells us “I have been unable to receive this blessing up to this day. But now I long for this with unrestrained fervor.” She makes clear that her unrestrained desires have not been for wine, food, and sex alone. Her abundant desires have persisted in the desert and they have grown to include an unrestrained desire for the divine. Her thirst for this is one her Virgin intercessor has not been able to quench. She needs it badly and she repeats again her request. “For this reason I ask and beg you not to disregard my request, but bring me without fail those life-

²²⁰ Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 153.

giving and sacred gifts.” Then with a final request that her student pray for her, she is off—running again—“into the depths of the desert.”

Zosimas keeps his word, not uttering a single part of his tale to anyone. He does however, pray to God in earnest that he might be able to see Mary again. He prays for the year to go by quickly “as if it were one day” (33)—and for the readers of this *Life*, his prayers are answered. We are fast-forwarded to a year later. During the Lenten feast Zosimas does as he was instructed and does not leave the monastery, though we are told that it is not out of obedience that he complies, but rather because he becomes ill and is stricken with a fever for several days. Thus the monastery becomes for Zosimas a place where he is forced to keep his promise. Like Mary’s desert, these spaces force their inhabitants to keep their promises to their mothers. After a few days Zosimas recovers from his illness and then does as he was commanded. “After placing the undefiled body and sacred blood of Christ our God in a small chalice, he put in a small basket dried figs, dates, and a small portion of lentils soaked in water, and departed late in the evening (34).”

After a delayed arrival, Mary finally appears on the opposite bank of the river. We have already been prepared for this scene. They stand on opposite sides of the water and Zosimas worries that she will not be able to cross the great river. But she made the sign of the cross, not over herself but rather, over the river, and then she began to walk on water. Zosimas is overcome with emotion and when she finally reaches him on the opposite bank she asks immediately for his blessing. He obeys and then they pray together after which she gives “the monk the kiss of love on his mouth (35).” Then, Mary “raised her hands to heaven, sighed with tears in her eyes and cried aloud, ‘Lord, now

lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.’ ”

She asks Zosimas for one final favor, “Under the protection of God’s grace return now to the monastery, and come again next year to that dry streambed where I met you before. Come without fail, in the name of the Lord (36).” But has she not already signaled the end with her prayer to God? As readers we are cued to her foreshadowing prayer. But perhaps Zosimas is as well. He poignantly replies to her request, “I only wish it would be possible for me to follow you from now on, and look always upon your holy face.” He knows that it is not possible. The aging ascetic, abandoned by his family as a child only to travel into the depths of the desert to find one who will be more than a mother, knows the script and seems amply prepared for it. Immediately after declaring his desires he motions toward his basket that he has prepared for her and asks her to take with her some food. She leaves him, but not before she asks for his prayers and he responds by touching her feet, his eyes filled with tears. He does “not dare to hold for long one who could not be held.” His only desire is to look upon her face and yet he knows what we know, that “she is as vast—and as uncompromisingly elemental in her passions—as the desert itself.”²²¹ Zosimas returns to his monastery.

The following year he returns to the place where they first met. He looks around but does not see her. “He looked carefully right and left, turning his gaze in every direction like a most experienced hunter pursuing a most sweet prey (37).” (She has taught him well!). Finally he moves closer to the dry streambed and finds the one he seeks. Mary has died. She lies there, in their spot, motionless with “her hands folded in the proper manner.” He rushes toward her but does not embrace her body. Instead he only

²²¹ Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints*, 147.

touches her feet, again. His eyes filled with tears, he finds instructions left behind for him to bury the saintly body. The message left in the sand also states that she died the very night they met the year before. They were written and left for Zosimas by the saint herself. She says to him, “return dust to dust (38).” Again, she reminds him and us that her body and the desert are one. He is unable to bury her on his own. The earth is unyielding to his attempts to dig. But fortunately, this *Life* has borrowed a page from the *Life of Paul*: beside her body stands a huge lion waiting to do the work of digging for him. Zosimas continues to “bathe the blessed woman’s feet with tears” (40) before covering her body with the earth. Zosimas and the lion part ways, heading in opposite directions. Zosimas returns to his monastery while the lion returns to the innermost part of the desert—presumably whence it came.

Conclusions

In Sophronius’s hagiography of Mary of Egypt, readers are supplied with two narratives—one of a life-long ascetic and the other of the teacher he seeks in the desert. The text, like the others examined in this work, is one in which the desert saint is forced to break away from his or her source, defined in Anzaldúan terms as a family, or here more specifically, as mother. Both Mary and Zosimas follow this formula, however strikingly different those breaks are. The water of the Jordan River plays a significant role as a passageway to the desert that each ascetic must call home. As they cross the river each sets out on a new way of life and therefore a new worldview. The parallels between the rushing water of this important river and the dried up streambed in the deepest part of the desert where Mary lives are striking. The allusion to a space that

cannot possibly have water, ostensibly because of the harshness of this environment, and yet must have contained a river at some point in its existence, holds again in balance the impossible with the possible.

The spaces of Sophronius's desert are vast. There is a lot of movement throughout the text and each space cast as a formative part of the Mary's life. Her movements into and out of spaces as well as her barred entrance into the church, become the touchstones for how readers view the transfiguration of her desires. Mary's rejection from the church, coupled with the description of the Virgin Mary as her intercessor, suggests a dichotomy between the virgin and the whore. Scholars have picked up on this apparent contrast in order to suggest that the *Life of Mary of Egypt* is a story of redemption and conversion. The saintly harlot has proven a potent and popular metaphor for redemption.²²² And yet, as Miller and Burrus have demonstrated, narratives of redemption seemingly miss the excessiveness of *eros* that hagiographies like the *Life of Mary* are attempting to articulate. Reading Mary's *Life* with Anzaldúa helps further illumine the sanctity of sex. The suggested dichotomy between virgin and whore is undermined in order to describe a mirrored, even if refracted, relationship between the two.

Similar to *the Life of Paul*, where Antony yearns and seeks for Paul, the *Life of Mary* describes a student's desire matched only by that of the saint he seeks. Sophronius has creatively penned two lives his text. Mary's *Life* can only begin once we are given the life of Zosimas and the parallels between each are striking. Abandonment and rejection play important roles in the formation of both ascetics and like the other

²²² Even with scholarly interventions reading this text as erotically charged narrative less about conversion and redemption and more about the transcendence and translation of *eros*, recent scholarship on the older models of redemption and conversion persist, e.g. Scarborough.

hagiographies studied in this work, each functions as a break from the source in Anzaldúan terms. As Mary reaches the height of her narrative in which her abundant desire for sex detailed, we are drawn to the heightened arousal of Zosimas's desire to hear more. His insatiable lust for her story is paralleled by her lust for men. This rhetorical move allows readers to see the way in which desire is cast throughout this text; not as something to be diminished or repressed, but rather controlled and reconfigured as a divine *eros*.

The Virgin Mary functions not only as her intercessor, but as her mirror from which she can view herself. Anzaldúa's concept of the hybrid Guadalupe is useful to consider the ways in which the virgin/whore dichotomy is undermined. As Guadalupe comes to represent the pinnacle of hybridity, the *amasamiento* (amalgamation) of two or more seemingly inconsistent paradigms—virginity and abundant sexual desire, or as Miller reminds us, the concept of a “holy woman” that retains female *eros* intact without tainting it with excess, we can see in *the Life of Mary of Egypt* seemingly contradictory images of female selfhood that never resolve into a coherent whole. Fragmented pieces are brought together as familiar elements in order to describe profound significations of meaning. This is what Harpham refers to as the grotesque in literature and what Miller sees as part of the goal of a text like *the Life of Mary*.²²³ The undermining of the virgin/whore dichotomy is an important part *mestiza* consciousness. Sophronius's construction of the desert allows him to inscribe a saint whose selfhood transcends the duality of the dichotomy. Like the other *mestiza* saints described in this work, Mary's transcendence of this duality contributes to the ongoing, competing, and contesting identities constructed in late antiquity.

²²³ Miller's reading of Harpham in “Harlot?,” 427.

CONCLUSION

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE EGYPTIAN *FRONTERA* IN THE LATE ANCIENT IMAGINATION

The three hagiographies considered in this study exemplify the ongoing, contestatory work of authors to construct what emerged as novel Christian identities in late antiquity. Hagiography's emergence as a divergent genre of literature rooted in ancient biographies, histories, and "Hellenistic romances," coincides with a turn to the spatial. These coevolutionary occurrences resulted in a body of literature that centered on identity and space as simultaneous, interrelated concepts that are mutually influential and mutually constituted.

I have argued throughout that conceiving of the Egyptian desert as a borderland, in Anzaldúan terms, would enable readers to see the desert saint as a constructed identity whose characteristics are depended on the cultural meanings associated with borderland spaces. Anzaldúa's important text, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, argues for a concept of space that takes into account multiple ways of perceiving space. Therefore, real and imagined spaces are aligned in such a way as to make clear possibilities of a thirdspace, or a borderland space.

Not quite a borderland space, Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Aztec tribes indigenous to Mexico and Latin America, figures prominently in Anzaldúa's spatial thinking. Because many Chicana/o thinkers have described Aztlán as a space that was, a space that is, and a space that will be, it is clear that some spaces are capable of multiple

significations of meaning. As the bases for her own rendering of borderland space, Aztlán opens up a way for Anzaldúa to conceive of contested hybrid spaces. As a space that both permeates and exceeds narrative human time, Aztlán resonates with the Egyptian desert described by hagiographers in late antiquity. Based on these characteristics of Aztlán, Anzaldúa give us borderland spaces tinged with a similar promise of right relationship to human life and equally grounded in the political and geographic realities of particular spaces that hint at the failures of those same promises—not unlike the dimensions of holiness ascribed to the Egyptian desert.

Hagiographers in late antiquity used the Egyptian desert as a tool for constructing queer Christian identities. Any attempts to fix Christian ascetics into any one particular identity will already prove to be overdetermined. Much like Anzaldúa's *mestizas*, the desert helpfully suggests the limits of identity found in the construction of a Christian ascetic.

There is, then, a productive tension at play within the hagiographies studied here. While it seems that there is authorial intention behind attempting to pin down a particular identity for subjects of these texts, Antony, Paul, and Mary of Egypt, Athanasius, Jerome, and Sophronius have, it seems, created characters that resist identification even while they, on some level at least, assist in identification. That is to say that Christian hagiography does eventually produce Christian ascetic identity as a site of contestation, competition, and negotiation of multiple identities.

This dissertation has attempted to contribute to the body of scholarly literature that takes seriously the potency of spatial productions literary or otherwise, and their utility in human life. I have done so by showing the desert space described by some

authors as equally transgressive, and often imagined, which itself contributes to the articulation of the desert ascetic.

Anzaldúa's theories of borderland space have helped me to suggest that the desert in Christian hagiography is a borderland. In this way, I attempt to push our conversation beyond the often over-determined invocation of space and its "realness" in some traditional historical accounts of late antiquity. I return to Peter Brown's comment cited in my introduction: "Despite their physical closeness to the settled land, the monks of Egypt towered in the imagination of contemporaries because they stood against an ocean of sand that was thought to stretch from Nitria to the furthest edges of the known world. They were a *new humanity*, settled where no human beings should be found."²²⁴ This notion evokes the desert of the imagination while also reemphasizing the very "real" desert they inhabited.

James Goehring and Antoine Guillaumont have argued that the space of the desert is as equally imagined and ambivalent as the saint who produces it. Extending the promise of these insights, I have examined the desert as a borderland space in Anzaldúan terms. The subjectivity that is constructed by these texts and simultaneously produced with desert space corresponds to what Anzaldúa has called *mestizaje*. While terms such as queer, grotesque, and subversive have all been applied to the subjectivity of the desert saint, thereby signaling the ambivalence inherent in constituting such an identity, I contend that *mestizaje* gets at the missing piece: the relationship between space and subject, saint and desert, *mestiza* and *frontera*. *Mestizaje* is a term which originally refers to a racial and ethnic "mixture" that is inherently tied to an understanding of space. So,

²²⁴ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 216 (emphasis mine).

mestizaje then, gives us the kind of multi-dimensional approach to understanding the mixedness of identity that might otherwise be lacking in other approaches.

I have taken this literary journey through the borderlands of the late ancient Egyptian desert by way of three hagiographies: the *Life of Antony*, the *Life of Paul the Hermit*, and the *Life of Mary of Egypt*. I have already noted the shared intertextual relationship between these three texts, and how their similar themes and connections have made them apt for studying in unison. Rather than focus on ideas that have long been explored as the stock characteristics of Christian hagiography and desert asceticism (renunciation, austerity, repression, solitude, and abjection), I have chosen to explore other themes such as breaking away from a source, loss of homeland, paradisaic landscapes, new familial relationships, finding oneself, and returning home. These offer new and illuminating interpretive possibilities. The payoff is at once theological, political, historical, and social. If the traditional desert ascetic is the very emblem of sanctity, then the role of the desert as nothing other than a counter city has been far too reductive. Understanding space as a location of possibility allows for the disruption of normative binaries such as holy/demon, human/nonhuman, virgin/whore, man/woman, and so on. Anzaldúa gives us *la frontera* as this location of possibility; I maintain that Christian authors of late antiquity were involved in a similar project with the desert.

For Athanasius, the desert plays a pivotal role in his description of his holy man, Antony, that would become a touchstone for later hagiographers. Athanasius populates his desert with other ascetics and therefore creates communities of people to whom Antony cleaves to at various points. He breaks from his family, and joins new families and communities along his journey. The relationality between Antony and these new

families is prominent in this text. In the end what he finds, what he returns to, is a homeland.

Similarly for Jerome the desert where his saint is dwelling is also characterized by having a glassy spring and enough food to keep the aging ascetic nourished. Wild animals populate this desert. They are excessive in their sheer number, but these animals also exceed the limits of their creatureliness. Centaurs, satyrs, wolves, ravens, and lions all push the boundaries of their animal existence in various ways. More important, each of these creatures signals the potency of the desert they call home. The desert created them as much as they create it. And all are created by the hagiographer's pen. Not just mirrors of the desert *mestiza*, but also *mestizas* themselves, they inscribe a familial connection undermining the boundary between human and nonhuman creatures. As Antony moves through the space of Jerome's desert he is on a journey of becoming which ultimately leads him to the master he seeks in the innermost desert, the depths of which Antony could only imagine once he could imagine a teacher for him there.

Finally, Sophronius's *Life* of the harlot saint takes its readers on a wider journey than do the preceding texts. Landscapes shift, cities change, famous rivers become dried up streambeds. Churches, boats, courtyards, and monastery walls all contribute to constituting the vast, wild, aridness of Mary's open desert. There are no plants or animals in her desert (save one lone lion who appears at her death to help bury her). The author of this life has instead taken the space of the desert on its own terms. There is no need for denizens of this space to assist in the production of the desert and the saint. The abundance of saintliness and eroticism bound up in the figure of Mary of Egypt mirrors the desert she runs through. It equally possesses the wild, untamable saintliness we have

come to associate with the saint herself. As she describes her life and travels readers are entreated to enter into a wild tale about unrestrained eroticism and insatiable desire.

I have described the desert in late ancient hagiography as a borderland space—a *frontera*. Doing so takes seriously the important work of the Chicana lesbian writer and thinker Gloria Anzaldúa and her theories of space. But more importantly it exposes and draws attention to desert space in these particular texts as necessarily both a real and imagined space. Thirdspaces, as both Anzaldúa and later Edward Soja would term them, are the in-between, the messy places of possibility where two or more cultures meet, often violently, always creatively, and in meeting produce something else, something different. When Soja describes reading Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (arguably one of the most significant and foundational treatises on spatial thinking—and, at the very least one of the earliest), he notes a difficulty in gathering together what he recognized as important, if idiosyncratic and at times incoherent, streams of thought throughout the work. It wasn't until much later that Soja came to understand Lefebvre's writing as not a "conventional academic text, with arguments developed in a neat linear sequence from beginning, to middle, to end."²²⁵ Similarly Anzaldúa describes her own work as an *autohistoria*—part autobiography, part history, part narrative, part poetry, and non-linear—a genre that resists genre. That both these thinkers could be hailed as spatial thinkers has as much to do with their seemingly idiosyncratic methods as their ability to conceive of the multiplicity and validity of spaces—real and imagined. Christian hagiography has been described in similar terms as a genre resisting genre or a genre that conflates elements of many genres—a *metizaje* of literature. Is it too much then to

²²⁵ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 8.

suggest that hagiography is equally invested in exploring the possibilities of space and its implications, relations, and influences on subjectivity?

This dissertation aims to demonstrate that the conventional privileging of history and subject at the expense of space does more than simply occlude a more dynamic understanding of borderland space as, in the words of Soja, “a limitless composition of lifeworlds that are radically open and openly radicalizable; that are all-inclusive and transdisciplinary in scope yet politically focused and susceptible to strategic choice; that are never completely knowable but whose knowledge nonetheless guides our search for emancipatory change and freedom from domination.”²²⁶ It also continues to oppress and keep hidden the spaces of the margins where radical openness can work to end oppression. As Anzaldúa has made evident, a *mestiza* consciousness leads to new epistemology that in turn works to bring an end to the violence and injustices of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Overly optimistic as this assertion may seem, its impulse and possibility beg for a new reading of our world, our histories, our texts. In this way my goal throughout has been to show how a “spatial reading” of the *Lives* of Antony, Paul the Hermit, and Mary of Egypt could open the possibility for understanding the late ancient Mediterranean as a world under intense negotiations and struggling to determine a *mestiza* subject reflective of that diversity.

²²⁶ Ibid., 70.

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