



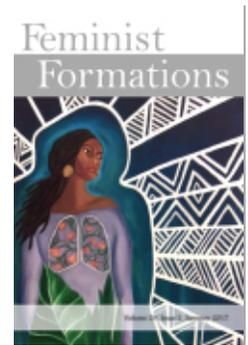
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Identity and Cross-Cultural Empathy: Writing to Sister Maryagnes Curran, O.S.F.

Suzanne Bost

Maryagnes Curran, O.S.F. (1931–2002), a sister in the order of St. Francis of Assisi, dedicated her life to serving Mexican women, both in the United States and in Mexico. Using empathy as a feminist alternative to identification and appropriation, I write a letter to Maryagnes that explores cross-cultural dialogue and reciprocal transformation. This letter builds from feminist philosophies of empathy (as developed by Lorraine Code and Carolyn Pedwell, in particular), post-oppositional consciousness (in the work of AnaLouise Keating), and nepantla (as theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa), and foregrounds a creative, personal voice. I juxtapose my own story as a non-Latina living and working at the edges of Latina/o Studies with Sister Maryagnes's border-crossings in hopes of creating new openings for affective connection across cultures. In my analysis, I focus on encounters that negotiate power asymmetries, attempt to bridge seemingly incommensurable differences, and ultimately surrender the self as the primary point of reference. The letter form keeps this analysis open-ended by inviting response from imagined readers.

Keywords: empathy / epistolary mode / identity / Latina/o Studies / missionary service / nepantla / Sister Maryagnes Curran, O.S.F.

Introduction: An Experiment in Empathy and Feminist Methodology

What we do have together in the middle of this thing is a brush with solidarity, and that's real.

—Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (2011), 266

As a non-Latina working in Latina/o Studies, questions about my identity have always hovered around my claims to knowledge. After two decades of teaching and publishing in the field, I continue to struggle with the possibility and desirability of cross-cultural identification.¹ Critiques of identity politics have led to a variety of more fluid and contingent relations to identity—such as those theorized by Paula Moya, Linda Martín Alcoff, and other postpositivist realists—but unless we are to embrace an unrealistic sense of being “post-identity” (which would obscure the ways in which powers and privileges continue to correspond to hierarchies based on race, gender, and sexuality), identity will remain firmly rooted in sociopolitical categories, family resemblances, and structural inequalities. I cannot identify as or even with a Latina, and to try would be presumptuous.² But what would it look like to identify *toward* Latina/os?

Lately I’ve been thinking about empathy as an alternative way to position myself socially and politically.³ Empathy is other-oriented and relational, crossing differences, while identification revolves around similarity to oneself.⁴ Empathy is an action and a choice rather than a cultural inheritance. It involves looking into another from outside and taking into oneself some of that other’s feelings; it thereby rests on permeability and elicits reciprocal transformation. I particularly like Carolyn Pedwell’s sense of empathy as “surrendering oneself to *being affected by that which is experienced as ‘foreign’*” (2014, 38; original emphasis). Empathy is stereotypically feminine, and it is also methodologically feminist. It’s a trait with which I can fully identify, having been raised to assimilate myself to my surroundings. (Still today, I adopt the hand gestures, accents, and emotions of whomever I’m talking to.) I posit this “weak” sense of self as an alternative to individuated identity and as a strategic approach to feminist and cross-cultural work. It is easier to reach out to others when one is less attached to oneself.

My epigraph above is taken from Lauren Berlant’s analysis of the cover image on her book *Cruel Optimism*: an image of two vulnerable bodies—a half-blind dog wearing a cone and a female human with spina bifida—trying to support each other in their “mix of ability and impairment” (2011, 266). This enactment of empathy is a cross-species effort, traversing a gulf of apparent incommensurability greater than any attempt at cross-cultural understanding, but it models the difficulty and faith involved in trying to make solidarity with an other. We can embody proximity and feeling even when reason tells us that we can’t literally identify with another. The gesture is “aspirational,” but the affect is real as well as the effort (2011, 267).

What follows is an experiment in empathy (with an emphasis on the experiential component of the word *experiment*): a letter to a woman who died more than a decade ago. Like empathy, letters are written from one location and sent out toward another, inviting another perspective in answer. Sister Maryagnes Curran, O.S.F. (1931–2002) was a white Catholic nun in the Order of St. Francis of Assisi. She was born and raised in Chicago, received degrees in Education, Communications, and Religious Studies, and began her career in

service to Latina/o communities in Chicago. After becoming fluent in Spanish, she became an affiliate of the Maryknoll sisters to join their mission in Latin America. In 1984, she began this journey in Nicaragua, but the violence of the revolution there led her to seek a different mission in Mexico, where she ultimately founded the Centro de Estudios para la Promoción Integral de la Mujer (CEPIM) in Oaxaca. She lived from 1987 to 1993 in Oaxaca and then returned to the United States to establish a mission on Pajarito Mesa outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico; she lived there until her death in 2002. Her work enacted many feminist principles, including that of solidarity across cultures as well as fostering women's cultural and economic independence. But her mission also came with a risk of cultural imperialism as she brought her US Catholic vision to others.

Sister Maryagnes didn't write formally and is nearly invisible in published documentation, but I have come to empathize with her (deeply, it feels) through an accident of shared locations. Her writings (most of them letters) are stored in the Women and Leadership Archives at Loyola University Chicago, and I encountered them there while working with my graduate students in a feminist research methods class in 2015. When I first peeked into those files, I sensed I would find some part of my own history, if not a glimpse of my very self. Both Maryagnes Curran and my grandmother, Marian Cassidy, were born and raised Catholic in Irish neighborhoods of Chicago, both studied in the buildings that now belong to Loyola University Chicago, and both ultimately settled and died in central New Mexico. Sister Maryagnes was an avowed feminist, and her chosen "field" was Latina/o communities.⁵ Her references, her routes, even her handwriting are all familiar to me. I felt like I could, at some structural level, identify with my subject. But, of course, I can't fully identify with Sister Maryagnes: her religious vocation alone creates experiences, knowledge, and perspectives remote from mine. Even when I'm writing about my own life experiences in this letter, I cannot fully identify with my past self. Yet I can empathize with the Sister, and empathize with my younger self whose journeys resonate with hers, and I do so in my letter below.

Across our disciplinary differences, Sister Maryagnes and I share unearned power based on our white skin and institutional supports that pave the way in our cross-cultural travels (the resources of the Catholic Church for Sister Maryagnes and a tenured position at Loyola University for me). Yet we also share a feminist commitment not to wield power over others, favoring, instead, an ethics of vulnerability and openness. We are both what Gloria Anzaldúa (my touchstone for intellectual humility and political bravery) would call "nepantleras": "boundary-crossers, thresholders who initiate others in rites of passage, activistas who, from a listening, receptive, spiritual stance, rise to their own visions and shift into acting them out, *haciendo mundo nuevo* (introducing change)" (Anzaldúa 2002, 571).⁶ *Nepantla* surely requires empathy, and its boundary-crossings enact transformation (sometimes subtle and local,

sometimes radical and far-reaching). Sister's rites were practical and reciprocal: organizing workshops and co-ops, teaching and learning new sewing techniques, building solar stoves for (and *with*) communities without electricity. My own words and pedagogy seem pale and useless by comparison, though I struggle to make my discipline as practical as possible.

Sister Maryagnes makes an excellent focal point for my reflections on identity and empathy not just because of our shared paths but because of the ways in which her chosen mission of service to Latina/os (Latinas, in particular) dramatizes both unequal power and humility, cross-cultural difference and assimilation, theory and practice. Mission and service are implicitly colonizing, assuming the "rightness" of the mission and the "neediness" of those it serves. (My students might say that the Sister had a "white savior complex.") A missionary sees a lack and attempts to fill it with what she believes to be good and true, thereby often not fully seeing what *is* there or the limits of her understanding of truth. In this sense, Sister Maryagnes's story serves as a cautionary tale, leading me to reflect on how academic work rests on a similar hierarchical structure, applying our theoretical frameworks to the object of our analyses. The word "object" chafes there because, in my work, it's as likely to be a person as it is to be a text, image, or event, but it is true: academic work makes an object out of its content. Our "subject" becomes an object when we study it, write about it, or teach it. Yet missionary service entails something transformative that academic work usually does not: relinquishing one's own home and family (sometimes even one's own name) to choose an "option" for others, living and working within the culture of the mission, not just studying it. The subject is enfolded and fluid, a partner in the missionary's work, and the mission transforms both server and served. Letters do something similar: by engaging Sister Maryagnes in dialogue, I imagine her as a living, dynamic woman, capable of response. Writing this letter is as an act of feeling and faith, though there is no rational expectation of response.

Following Berlant, there is a kind of "cruel optimism" to my choice of genre, as I am projecting my desire for an interlocutor on the subject of cross-cultural empathy onto an absent, and thereby mute, subject/object (Maryagnes Curran).⁷ Since Maryagnes will never respond, this dialogue is an engagement not exactly with her but with a reflection on what I need or want from an imagined Maryagnes Curran. But it's not simply an engagement with myself, either. In her introduction to *Object Lessons*, Robyn Wiegman questions the value of self-consciousness in ways that are relevant for me here. Wiegman's example is Whiteness Studies, where self-consciousness about whiteness is often problematically assumed to be an end in itself, an antiracist political instrument.⁸ Wiegman wonders how critiquing the power of white subjects does anything to dismantle racism, especially "since the very act of paying attention to it confers value" (2012, 29). Self-consciousness about one's own power simply points out that power rather than enacting redistribution. Here

is where empathy comes in: looking not at the self alone but at the self in its reciprocal and transforming engagements with others. A memoir would be an exercise in self-consciousness, while a letter invites a reciprocal exchange that would shift my position. My desire to move past self-consciousness toward transformation is another reason to choose a nun as my interlocutor: in her vocation, she surrendered her former self (name, home, and identity) to enact social change directly. The performances of self-surrender, faith, and action that accompany this lifestyle are overt in ways academic work might learn from. If it is possible to surrender oneself in writing, I do so here. I gesture toward Sister Maryagnes with the same hope and anticipation that comes with dialing a telephone. You never know who will pick up the other end or what they might say, but you let it ring.

Almost everything I know about Sister Maryagnes comes from letters that she wrote to others (which are now “preserved” in the archive).⁹ I read these letters as an interloper, alternately witnessing a dialogue I wasn’t intended to participate in and projecting myself desirously into the middle of the exchange. The letter I have written in response is likewise asymptotic, since the Sister will never respond from her grave. My readers in *Feminist Formations* are also an (un)foreseen audience to this letter. I chose to write all of this—Sister Maryagnes’s story, my story, my theoretical response to the politics of cross-cultural work—in a letter in order to present my ideas in a dialogic mode. My aim is to enact an “imaginative empathy,” which, as Lorraine Code describes it, defies “coherent monologic storytelling, stable epistemic assumptions, and the fixity of subject-object positions” (2001, 276–77). Letters assume a modesty of scope, an awareness of limited horizons rather than universal declarations, and an openness to whatever response might come. Letters create relations even as they talk about oneself; they are intimate border-crossers. In my letter to Maryagnes, I’m sharing both more and less than what the Sister would need or want to hear from me in a letter, creating friction with conventional expectations for letter-writing. I prefer friction to any smooth, self-assured argument; empathy should be thick with friction.¹⁰

This piece hovers at the edges of my disciplines, Latina/o literary studies and women’s studies. Though my ideas are shaped by Chicana epistemology (especially that of Gloria Anzaldúa but also María Lugones and Chela Sandoval), feminist theory (especially women of color feminisms and new materialisms), and affect theory, my genre is more literary than critical, inspired by texts like Anzaldúa’s mixed-genre *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Kathleen Stewart’s “ficto-critical” *Ordinary Affects*, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s haibun/memoir/psychotherapy narrative *A Dialogue on Love*. My focus in this writing is enacted empathy, practicing theory rather than discussing it in the abstract. (You can find more theory in the endnotes if you want it.) Following Wiegman, I am interested “in using identity to travel toward the affects, political horizons, and critical limits of the fields of study that have been established in its name”

and in creating work “in which identity and its knowledges are encountered in ways just as surprising, unnerving, and conflicted as we are” (Wiegman 2012, 12–13). In nepantla, the surprises, discomforts, recombinations, and pleasures are many; I hope to set some of these in motion here.¹¹

Letter to Sister Maryagnes, October 2015

“I want to go closer, emptying myself—like an empty cup—
in order to receive and to share the life of the poor as God does.”¹²

Dear Sister Maryagnes,

You seem like a person capable of deep understanding. Since I’m writing to you in your grave, that depth is impossibly deep. An empty cup I fill with words. Your attention to me might be my own projection; you, my ideal listener. I spent days and days “listening” to you, reading and rereading your letters in the archive, trying to understand. As in your words I quote above, “I want to go closer.” “I’ve been listening to women,” you wrote to Sister Doris in January, 1987. At El Centro de Estudios para La Promoción Integral de la Mujer (CEPIM)—the place you created in Oaxaca for women to come and talk about their faith, their family problems, or their poverty—you established workshops and needlework co-operatives to develop these women’s financial independence. During your six years there, the women mourned, confessed, shared recipes, and told stories as they did their embroidery. Please invite me in.

Your flesh and your spirit must be pierced by stories and traditions you could never have imagined on your own. What did you expect to come out of all that listening? This reminds me of a powerful essay by Lorraine Code on the limits of our ability to know others:

[L]istening is surprisingly unthought, undertheorized. . . . But good listening is often as tactile as it is auditory; thus neither purely objective, nor perfectly rational. . . . [I]t shelters and encloses, without requiring the *literal* touch that becomes invasive in relations of power asymmetry. It creates a palpably safe space that invites and honors trust. . . . It retains what I call a “normative realist” component that respects the integrity of tellers and listeners even though it may interrogate and reinterpret both tellings and hearings. (2001, 278)

Listening is an embodied material practice. I am doing it now while writing this letter, just as I strained toward you from the quiet archive where I found your letters, stretched over long tables of files. I imagine your respectful attention to the women in Oaxaca, straining toward them in an effort to understand their unfamiliar accents, leaning over their hands busy with sewing. What was the space like where you listened, Maryagnes? Was it warm? Was it quiet? Did you serve water, or tea, or wine? Of what was your shelter made? Of what your

power? “It is pure joy,” you wrote, “to be able to be open to God’s plan and to God—risking one’s comforts, reputation and gifts . . . to bring about a plan of liberation. . . . I am committed to the poor and to changing structures which are unjust—especially that effect [sic] women.”¹³

I started reading your files to learn more about cross-cultural empathy and feminist social justice; I also found shards of my own identifications. In my work, I have embraced pain and permeability as embodiments of feminist, cross-cultural community and coalition, alternatives to individual self-preservation. But I still struggle with practicing this ideal, with feeling joyful about risk and discomfort. What did you lose, and what did you keep, Sister Maryagnes? Can I tell you about my failures? Can we, in this letter, change structures together? Being open to God sounds as frightening as it does joyful. I don’t know this kind of faith, this willingness to open oneself to something beyond reason. It must be much harder than listening to women. How far would you go to follow God’s plan? Liberation theology: Set the world on fire.

My archive notes, in academic fashion, refer to you by last name, Curran, but no one calls a nun by her last name. I see you in your archive going by many names: Mary Agneta, Sister Moriah, La Hermana María Inés. Are these acts of misrecognition, mispronunciation, mislabeling? Or have you been all of these women? “Calling me is a little bit tricky,” you wrote to your fellow Sisters of St. Francis back in the United States when urging them to phone you at the Center. (I picture one telephone on a crowded desk shared by as many women as pass through there.) “They call me ‘Madre Mary-nes’ so ask for ‘Madre Mary-nes,’” you instruct, owning the name the Oaxacan women called you.¹⁴ (Convenient that it sounds in English like an adjective form of Mary, “Mary-ness,” calling you by your resemblance to the Blessed Mother.)

But you’re not a mother; you’re a sister: Hermana María at one point, Sister Mary of Pajarito Mesa later.¹⁵ Motherhood implies power, hierarchy, and antecedence, whereas sisters are generational equals. You would prefer that. As you explained, while listening to the humming voices of women in the co-operative sewing circle at CEPIM, “domination destroys the fundamental equality we have as persons.”¹⁶ Though feminist theory has shown us the problems with assuming equality under the banner of “sisterhood,” the ideal of making family broadly across cultures is one I support. Sisterhood is not easy—with biological sisters, chosen family, or partners in cross-cultural communication—but it breaks down barriers, putting us in the same house so that we must share our things and negotiate our conflicting needs.

I love the intimacy of calling out to one’s research subject by first name, but the presumption of kinship that comes with “sister” creates even greater proximity. “Sister” refers to relationship rather than individuality; sometimes it even eclipses the personal name. Sister is not an identity; it is a mutuality, a shared orientation toward the larger world. Sister lets one make family where there was none before.¹⁷

So, dear Sister . . .

Like me, you learned to speak Spanish and to practice Catholicism in Mexican ways, which must have helped you to make family when you left your Irish Chicago for the Mexican South. Why did you choose to leave your own culture, and why did you choose to serve Latina/os? Was it something in the worship? Or some fantasy of your own? What did it feel like the first time you prayed to La Virgen de Guadalupe?

When I was 10 years old, my sister and I were told we'd be moving to New Mexico. For my family of Chicago-bred "white ethnics," this was tantamount to falling off a Western cliff. "Don't drink the water!" "Will you lose your citizenship?" I was given books about volcanoes, pueblos, and the history of Santa Fe. And I was taught Spanish. As the youngest and most adaptable, I was to be the family translator. I pictured myself guiding my family up tall mountains pitched at 45-degree angles. I imagined mud buildings housing the "rich mixture" of cultures I was told I would find there.

In truth, it was sandy and the sun was too bright for my eyes. When I ordered my first bowl of *chile*, I spat it out all over the table. My skin blistered while swimming at Cochiti Dam (like a scorched inner planet when you're used to Lake Michigan).

Sister, why did you get Cs and Ds in college Spanish? Was it hard for your tongue, like mine, to rolls the *rr*'s, for your eyes to see the accents? Who encouraged you at mostly white Cardinal Stritch back in the 1960s? Of course, you went back later in life, improving your Spanish. I saw your certificate from the intensive Spanish program at the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas (1978), and your "Diploma de Mérito por excelencia en la asignatura de español" from Mundelein College in Chicago (1982). I read your transcripts from Mundelein College: "Vision de Iglesia Comprometida," "Hispanic Culture and U.S. Experience," "Popular Religion and Hispanic Spirituality," "Liturgy, Spirit, and Performing Arts," "Worship in Hispanic Community," and "Hispanic Educational Concerns."¹⁸ How did all of this learning about "Hispanic" practices touch you?¹⁹ What did you discuss most passionately? Which changed your life more, the content of your classes or the documentation certifying your "expertise" in these matters? I ask this as someone with degrees and publications that verify my Latina/o studies credentials, with papers and papers and papers documenting "success." These documents are supposed to matter more than the memories of painful pubescent conflicts and triumphs, strong flavors and stinging rejections. But how can paper matter more than flesh?

What does it mean to say, as you did from Mexico, "To live in another country, in another culture, is an unforgettable experience. You will never be the same"?²⁰ What, then, did you become? Was there a Mexican version of yourself? Was the old Chicago Irish self still there underneath?

Of course, I was not on a chosen mission as you were, Sister, and I didn't even leave the country, but I dedicated myself wholeheartedly to the study of all things New Mexican, in hopes of blending in there, as if I were an immigrant. Yet when I showed up to school with my sunburn and my long French braid, I felt like a lost cause. It wasn't just about race, exactly, or even culture. It was like being dropped into the midst of somebody else's history, in medias res, in nepantla. Even though the New Mexico I moved to failed to live up to the expectations for exotic cultural otherness I was taught from Chicago to expect, I knew that whoever I was there was not local. Nothing was mine.

I had never thought about my identity until we moved, and I still I have problems with it today. Will you bear with me here? I'm certain that the white privilege I've experienced, the ability to blend into the dominant culture of the United States rather than having to wear a hyphen, is at the root of my nonattachment to identity. But it is also the uprooting, the distance from the immigrants my family was, the distance from my supposed "home town." One of my favorite Chicana writers, Ana Castillo, writes in her recent memoir about her own experience moving from Chicago to New Mexico: "Living in New Mexico, I feel a profound connection to my ancestors and an awareness of location as a continuum" (2016, 183). Even though she was raised in Chicago, Castillo identified with New Mexico as part of the homeland of the Mexica people from which she descends (Aztlán). I was unable to claim, unable to feel such a connection. I learned Spanish like an outsider, working my mouth into positions it failed to learn when I was a baby; I still can't roll my *rr*'s, which makes my Spanish not fully comprehensible. I learned to cook New Mexican *chile* like an outsider, with the deliberation and effort of one presented with an "other" culture to adopt. But none of these things made me New Mexican. (Only on television is identity made of language and food.) I didn't find my identity in Chicago, either, when I returned there many years later. I had sisters all over the place, but where was my identity?

Chicana/o is the literature and culture I know best (having studied it assiduously from the moment of my arrival in New Mexico: the novels of Rudolfo Anaya, the poems of Lorna Dee Cervantes), but you never see me enfleshed inside it. Sometimes I'm lurking just off-stage. I knock on the door before I enter. I have routinely been questioned about my participation in Latina/o studies and, implicitly or explicitly, critiqued for being out of place. I am not complaining. There are real reasons to be wary of outsiders as well as real privileges and insights to be gained from being alternately in place and out, inside and out.

Sister, why did you never return to Chicago or Milwaukee? Did you lose your place there? Did you ever find another?

Quite honestly, there is no cultural tradition in which I feel like an *insider*. I was not raised to be an intellectual. My background, the way I speak, my experiences and desires place me outside any canon. Irish Chicago, the French Huguenots who settled among the Athabasca, the lost Jewish

ancestors whose religion was hidden: all are unavailable to me now. But my white skin color surely helped put me into my current location. I had teachers who encouraged me to read and read whatever I want, to travel and pursue a PhD, so I now look in to Latina/o studies from the office of a tenured professor. No one seems surprised that I am a literature professor until I walk to the podium in a Latina/o studies classroom, one of the few places inside academia where brown skin is expected. I always push away the podium: I'm too ill at ease with authority to belong behind such imposing furniture. I sit in a circle with my students, so we may face each other down from our visible and invisible complexities. Exposure, discomfort, vulnerability: all of these open our identities and facilitate the internalization of knowledge. It takes a while for everyone to bring their raggedy edges into discussion; on some days everyone tries to skim over the surfaces with sleek unconsciousness. Embodied learning is easiest on the hot days when the inner complexities sweat from our pores in an uncontrollable cleansing ritual. If tears squeak out, too, who will notice the difference?

Selves are messy and complicated, barely even held together by porous skin. Identity is a limited vocabulary that is (stubbornly or fleetingly) imposed or adopted according to certain calculations of resemblance.²¹ Identity is a formation of power, but it's not a power that anyone owns individually. I can't just claim an identity different from the one I look like. Identity is a property of social relations in which skin color (along with other visible or audible cues) is read like a map, a coarse and misleading measuring stick for sorting, including, and rejecting. We often get each other's coordinates wrong, but maybe that is better than any presumed accuracy. Let things get out of place; stand on the borders; refuse to be winnowed. I don't know the pleasures or dangers of brown skin firsthand, but they mark me deeply. Strangers assume they can make racist comments around me without causing offense, but I gag at them. Strangers think I don't understand their Spanish-language insults, so they talk freely about my body in the grocery store. Strangers assume I am not your sister, but we have the same dirt under our fingernails: the dirt of labor, the dirt of stigmatized ways of knowing.²² This is all subject to interpretation and change, new treaties and realignments.

Does anybody reject a good Spanish-speaking nun who comes bearing books and materials for sewing, who comes prepared to learn and to teach, to heal and to suffer illness? Of course they do. You are not everybody's sister. Who needs your books? Who needs your God?

Does anybody reject a well-meaning, well-studied white girl when she enters the field of Latina/o literature? Evidently not the people who've hired me and published my work. But there are missed relationships and misrecognitions, made worse by my shyness and my fear that you can still see the scars on my sunburnt skin. I mourn all of those kinships that never happened. I miss all of those lost relatives. How much we could have taught each other.

Feminist theorist AnaLouise Keating (who also shares our routes through Chicago and New Mexico) has helped me to think beyond the boundaries of identities. She calls for a “transformative multiculturalism” based on commonalities rather than differences and shared goals rather than shared identities. If we measured people by needs and desires rather than skin color, we’d find alliances in new places. I agree with Keating when she writes,

I am not suggesting that we should dismiss all identity categories and declare ourselves from this day forward “color-blind,” “gender-blind,” and so forth. . . . My point here is that educators, scholars, and others who are concerned with social justice need to become more aware of how these categories function to prevent us from recognizing our interrelatedness. (2007, 3)

Identity matters because it has mattered for centuries; it has sorted, excluded, and established hierarchies that shape the world we live in. But identity categories, as Keating argues, often serve to make social divisions seem natural or inevitable, and they obscure the complexities within and commonalities between any groups. What do you think about that?

The “post-oppositional consciousness” Keating develops in her later work resembles the empathy I am trying to enact here: sharing consciousness across differences, translating between cultures (Keating 2012). Like Keating, I want to complicate the maps that freeze identity into hierarchical arrangements. Traversing the maps—moving to New Mexico, for instance—does not necessarily change them. Engaging a place on the map in a new or contradictory way might: messing with the names, disregarding the borders. Perhaps this is what my edge of Latina/o studies has to offer. Perhaps this is what you were aiming for, too, Sister?

From what I can tell in your archive, you carried your orientation toward Latina/os everywhere you went. I found stamps from Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras in your passport, but, beyond these Latin American travels, there was also the time you spent living in an “Association House” in a Chicago Puerto Rican neighborhood while studying the teen drop-out rate in high schools. An unexpected Irish nun in an “undesirable” Latina/o neighborhood, you wrote, “I share a common life with my neighbors—laundrymat, vacuum cleaner, cup of milk. I know survival in the city and the hardship of life.”²³ In 1984, you dragged this loyalty with you to Ocotol, Nicaragua, where you hid under a table with Maryknoll nuns while the Contras bombed the Sandinistas: “War is an experience very removed from North Americans. One bullet can wipe out a life—my life or a Nicaraguan Child’s life. It seems so much to ask of a little developing country: to become accustomed to living with a war. Pray for all of us here as we live the message of the cross—in the suffering, rejection, death and resurrection of Jesus our Savior.”²⁴ When you left Nicaragua, wondering if perhaps God was calling you to Mexico instead, you vowed that you would always have “a special place” in

your heart for the Nicaraguan struggle.²⁵ In each of these places—even your hometown, Chicago—you were nonnative, experiencing the unexpected, taking new cultures into your body, being sisters with strangers, sharing the dangers of war as well as the mundane cup of milk.

For a nun, perhaps for anyone who identifies deeply with a worldview that crosses borders, culture is cross-cultural. Your faith crossed the American continent. And your “option for the poor,” your mission to serve those in need, muddied class boundaries, too. Though you chose to, as those you served likely did not, you washed your own clothes alongside the communities you joined, sharing their poverty along with their dirty water and their laundry-day gossip.

Of course, you already know all this, but I want my other readers to know it, too.

Sometimes I worry about your capacity for empathy, as when you wrote, in 1982, “Throughout the Bible God cherishes the poor as a special treasure. I want to live and be with God’s most treasured people in order to share with them in community and to be brought to the fullness of Jesus. How well Jesus knew that the power of God is shown where there are hurting, sick, lame people. I hear the call of God to embrace the [passion] and suffering and to bring healing, caring and newness and to be healed, cared for, and renewed.”²⁶ You wrote this before your departure for Latin America, and this condescending view of “the poor” as a “special treasure” reflects your naivety as well as the clear line you once perceived between you and them.²⁷ Yet you also speak of community, sharing, fullness, and embrace. You speak of being healed, cared for, and renewed while you participate with God in the healing, caring, and renewing of others. Your intention was reciprocity, but you can’t decide, on your own, to be reciprocal. You can’t decide, on your own, to be a sister. What ability did you have to heal others? What wounds of your own required healing? In community, we must all be special together.

Most of what I know about you comes from the letters written back to your order’s motherhouse in Milwaukee, implicitly justifying your use of God’s resources, explicitly asking for more resources, more sisters, more support from the Church hierarchy. You found good Catholic families in the United States who would donate money to feed good Catholic families in Mexico.²⁸ You were a translator between wealth and poverty. “For a country like the USA which mostly builds bombs and bullets instead of houses, it is wonderful that there are individual families in the USA who are helping people build houses.”²⁹ This is indeed wonderful. But is it sisterhood when people submit envelopes full of cash for their parish to mail off to Mexico? Who’s patting themselves on the back? You were, inevitably perhaps, a broker between remote and unequal powers. Like a teacher, you not only practiced empathy of your own but sought to create empathy in others, too.

Maybe this is why you sent so many photographs with your letters, making the women of CEPIM *real* for the church authorities, displaying their bodies

and homes. This is an ambivalent gesture. It is important to consider the “subjects” of the mission in their embodied and emplaced specificity. Yet these images also feed into the negotiations for resources. You provided material evidence of the *otherness* of the women you served, giving potential donors a visual reward for their efforts, a commodity to be purchased. (The pillowcases embroidered by the women at CEPIM were likewise marketed for sale in Milwaukee.) Your border-crossings, Maryagnes, went in both directions and came in many forms—letters, goods, money, and ideas, in addition to your own embodied travels—each enmeshed in its own terms and hierarchies. These are negotiations we must account for, implications we must understand, different interpretations to balance. (This is why literary critics like me spend so much time close-reading details.)

I enjoyed reading your 1987 letter in Spanish to the Oficina Arquidiocesana para Latinoamérica in Milwaukee. Most of your letters are in English, written so that the other sisters in the United States could read them, but this one demonstrates a sense of comfort and belonging in Spanish. “Una de las cosas que he aprendido durante el tiempo que he estado aquí en México es la importancia de **estar presente** con la gente mejicana,” you wrote.³⁰ “¡Presente!” evokes committed alliance, empathy and community: not just *being* with others but *standing up* with them. Though you used bold type rather than exclamation points, I feel like this is what you meant. Yet just two months later, in a personal letter to Sister Doris, you seem to hold yourself at a distance from the women in Oaxaca: “I think I am doing pretty well. I know it is important to take care of myself and be positive and hopeful and to take the time I need for this. It did me a lot of good to go to the U.S. and be with our Sisters—they were really very good and hospitable to me. It would be much better for me to have some one [*sic*] to make community with and maybe someday this will happen. I have learned a lot about God and am still learning. . . . And there is a time for everything . . . a time for growth . . . a time for being alone . . . a time for sharing. So I hope to have the time to be with you all in another month.”³¹ Does this mean that you didn’t find community among the mejicanas with whom you were “presente”? With but apart from? This is the sort of empathy that maintains distinctions rather than blurring subject-object, visitor and host. This is the sort of barrier I’m trying to break down between teacher and student, critic and author, letter writer and letter reader, but the structures themselves (the architecture of classrooms, written publications, and missions) stubbornly block attempts at fluidity.

1987 must have been a difficult year for you, still trying to find your physical presence in Oaxaca, composing that new self you were becoming. I found monthly letters written back “home” in 1987—documenting, in words and with photographs, your goals, your surroundings, the people you met, the challenges of your day-to-day life—but not much about your later years at CEPIM. Was there less to document once you were “settled,” less need to write? Too little progress? Too much loneliness? (Maybe there were letters throughout the

90s, but somehow they didn't make into the archives? That possibility invokes intriguing speculation about accidental loss, censorship, and archival politics.)

Maybe, as you began to blend into your new community in Oaxaca, your orientation shifted from the United States to Mexico, erasing the need to continually touch back to your order and your former life. Maybe you lost your authorial distance from the people you were serving, the hierarchical drive to write about the others. If you truly became "present" with the women at CEPIM, sharing sweat and tears, perhaps the lines blurred and there was no longer an object to study.

I found one letter from 1988, in which you report on the growth of other organizations for women outside of Oaxaca, and another, from 1989, reporting that you'd moved in with another missionary nun with whom you took pleasant walks in the park: "Since last April I have been living with a Medical Mission sister. We are able to share the joys and frustrations of mission life—which is very supportive. We have a small two-bedroom apartment located near the center of town. There is a tree-filled park at either end of the block—for early morning walks."³² And then no letters until the 1997 news of your move to New Mexico.³³ What happened? Did you fall in love? How did this relationship add to or detract from your relationship with the women at CEPIM? The possible stories that could fill the archival gap are endless, an author's best fantasy.

Ten years after your "call" to Latin America—apparently just as your passport was about to expire—you returned to your home country and settled in New Mexico to serve Mexican nationals living in colonias on the outskirts of Albuquerque. (Surely our cars must have passed each other on I-25!) You applied for grants to support your new mission and chronicled "A Day in the Life of a Mary's Pence Ministry / The Pajarito Mesa, Albuquerque, New Mexico," accounting for your hours from waking to sleeping, traveling up to the Mesa to visit the women there, discussing exercise regimens with a woman recovering from an auto accident, planning the menu for a community celebration (hot dogs, watermelon, and ice cream), dropping in on the sewing circle.³⁴ There are photographs of you standing among the families you "served." In the 1997 letter back to your order, you describe your mission in this way: "My overall objective in serving the people is to be a leader and servant accompanying the Mexican Nationals living in a colonia on the Pajarito Mesa. . . . I attempt to promote justice and empower people to solve their problems."³⁵ It must have been hard to live under all of those contradictions, to be both leader and servant, to empower others with your own vision.

The political essays you wrote in the 1990s show that you had been reflecting on these contradictions. (I should add that your turn to this kind of writing later in your life also reflects your deepening sense of urgency and commitment.) I found, in a 1991 article you published in your order's newsletter, your first overt identification as a feminist and a border-crosser: "This newsletter facilitates my looking north across the border to you, my sisters and brothers, to share the

Mexican woman's struggle for full humanity. This cross-culture sharing, that is, mission feedback, can not only help us to critically examine our own experience, but relate our experience to the experience of women in Mexico and throughout the world. Coming from a feminist perspective and connecting with Wisdom, who dwells within, we can implant a hope of bridging common bonds and venturing toward a world of justice and empowerment.³⁶ This translational empathy, looking back across the border in an effort to "bridge" your work in Mexico with social justice work in the United States and the broader world, has the potential to "revise, restage, and open up cultural, social, and affective relations in ways that can be politically transformative" (Pedwell 2014, 38). "Mission feedback" reaches back home, touching base with the rhetorics of humanity learned from the Sisters of St. Francis as well as inserting the rhetorics of humanity learned in Mexico into the social justice practiced in the United States. You shuffled ideas about humanity and justice back and forth across borders, giving you multiple angles of vision.

Pajarito Mesa was a borderlands of its own: unzoned, with no water, no electricity, no roads, and no addresses. The trailers the Mexican families lived in were illegally placed there and could be removed by the US authorities at any time. You describe the women of the Mesa's sense of "loneliness and abandonment," stranded in their separate trailers while their husbands were off working. How did you, as an outsider, build community for or with these women? Did they feel any of the Mexico in you? Certainly your Oaxacan Spanish must have felt closer to home than the "Spanglish" often spoken in Albuquerque. I imagine a Mexican island on the Mesa with the United States looming all around.

By 2001 you had moved into a trailer on the Mesa alongside las mejicanas; like the others, you were literally off the map, and your moveable home was subject to potential relocation. I found an Albuquerque Tribune article about Pajarito Mesa and your work there. The title of the article, "Blessed Are the Poor," invokes your earlier rhetoric about God treasuring the poor, but I can tell that, in your later years, you were thinking deeply about the meanings of wealth and poverty, mission and service. You are quoted at length here and, in my view, at your greatest eloquence: "Why are Christians on one hand extolling poverty as virtuous and on the other hand trying to alleviate poverty around the world? Poverty of spirit is voluntary; being poor is involuntary. . . . Poverty of spirit is my awareness that I cannot save myself. I am basically defenseless. Neither money nor power will spare me from suffering and death, no matter what I achieve in this life. Poverty of spirit is my awareness that I need God's help and mercy more than I need anything else. Poverty of spirit is getting free of fear. Being poor in spirit means letting go of the myth that the more I possess, the happier I'll be."³⁷

With your "option for the poor," you chose voluntary poverty in community with people whose placement in the United States was deemed "illegal." You chose to be illegal alongside them (breaking down the barriers I noted in your

earlier writing), having your own trailer cited by the police for its placement on nonallotted land. You repaired broken bicycles and pulled discarded cardboard from dumpsters to be used in the construction of solar cookers. You let go of your defenses; you opened yourself to the suffering that we all inevitably share (though so many of us fight, and save, and exercise in a futile effort to avoid it). But poverty isn't just a state of mind or a personal declaration: it is a physical condition of hunger, a lack of personal security, embodied vulnerability to the world outside. "How we relate to material objects reveals who we are and the condition of our souls," you conclude.³⁸ Culling reusable cardboard and using it to help prepare a home-cooked meal with a family deemed "illegal" by the government: this orientation toward objects refuses official standards of inclusion and exclusion and refuses the original meanings and intentions designated for the objects. Valuing the discarded and the unzoned, you sat in an illegal trailer and made mini-pizzas in a stove powered by the sun and your own creativity.³⁹

This image of you, sister, reminds me of Gloria Anzaldúa, a woman with whom I imagine you'd share strong ties of empathy and affinity across cultures if you could have known each other in life. I close with a few words of Anzaldúa's that your life embodied:

[Y]ou don't build bridges to safe and familiar territories, you have to risk making mundo nuevo, have to risk the uncertainty of change. And nepantla is the only space where change happens. Change requires more than words on a page—it takes perseverance, creative ingenuity, and acts of love. (Anzaldúa 2002, 574)

The colonia on Pajarito Mesa was a "mundo nuevo," a created space rather than an existing territory. You moved yourself inside there. You repurposed and reconfigured old materials, taught and learned new ways of doing. Like me, you were always imperfect, but always moving longingly across new borders; we build the bridges as we go. I hope someday, too, to build my own new world. Risk, creativity, transformation: sister, I love you.

Contigo,⁴⁰
Suzanne

Postscript: Empathy in a New Era of Racial Politics

"No machinery could close the gap between her world and the world for which I had been summoned to speak."

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015), 5

Since I first wrote this letter, empathy has appeared with increasing frequency as a subject of political debate. At the same time that I have been struggling

to adopt empathy as an ideal, I am constantly reminded about the barriers to empathy that seem increasingly insurmountable as well as the potentially unidirectional presumption of my desire to empathize across cultures. In an essay published in *The Atlantic* in the Fall 2015, John Paul Rollert contrasts President Barack Obama's optimism about the possibility for empathy and change to Tanehisi Coates's recent focus, in *Between the World and Me*, on the deep structures that perpetuate racism. Rollert reminds us that empathy is a privilege—a privilege of those in positions of power wanting to understand those whom they (consciously or unconsciously) structurally disadvantage. It is important to ask, Why does someone from the dominant culture want to empathize with those from marginalized cultures? Is it for some sense of personal redemption (as in, "I'm not one of those racists, so let me off the hook")? Egocentrism (as in, "I want to be a part of your margins, too")? Excessive self-love? For me, it is based on a sincere belief that, if my work were to remain self-referenced, I would be reinforcing the current structures of margin and center, privilege and otherness. In straining across borders, I am trying to decenter myself and my own unearned power.

I have chosen empathy as the framework for this straining because it is structured around difference. Following the epigraph from *Between the World and Me* that begins this section, empathy recognizes the gaps between experiences and identities even as it strains (aspirationally, recalling Berlant) to cross them. It is a bridging device. In an earlier essay entitled "A Muscular Empathy," Coates writes directly about the difficulty of crossing racial barriers with empathy. He rejects "soft, flattering, hand-holding empathy" in favor of a "muscular empathy rooted in curiosity" (Coates 2011). While I recoil at the implicit engendering of "muscular" as superior to "soft," a muscularity built upon curiosity is something I can stand by. Curiosity involves a form of self-relinquishing, a willingness to open one's experience and understanding by exploring other ways, other beings. The muscles involved in curiosity are those that open eyes, mind, and heart. Curiosity puts one in the position of student rather than teacher, recipient rather than giver, listener rather than talker. In the current academic climate, however, I find my job description to be much at odds with this curious empathy. My job is to teach, to speak, to write, to publish. Rather than being curious about what my students have to teach me, I am supposed to teach them certain skills and knowledges and then evaluate their ability to adopt the skills and knowledges I have modeled. The dynamics of lecturing, grading, and authoring work against the dynamics of curious empathy.

This has been a great concern for me lately as racism in the United States has become again more overt and "race relations" are increasingly revolving around what the popular media like to call "hostilities." With the news media and social media helping to make visible images of police violence against people of color, images of anti-Mexican posters at Donald Trump rallies, and images of students rising up under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter, racial difference

is highlighted as a social problem and a source of struggle. Though the impressive resurgence of antiracist protest is often peopled by activists of many races, the rhetoric is about identity and ally-ship (each of which rests on structures of division). I'm pretty sure I've always been an ally—or, at least, tried to be—but hadn't called it such until the resurgence of the language of division. I am now, more so than two decades ago, a white person reaching across barriers as an ally. I am not saying that these barriers were not there before; they surely were. But the language of racial politics is increasingly—and perhaps realistically—now focusing on these rather than the rhetoric of hybridity, coalition, and contingency that dominated my study of race in college and graduate school (during the apex of postmodern theory and neoliberal multiculturalism). So I am relearning my position as not just a “positionality” but as a source of barriers that are triggered by skin color regardless of how I feel, how I think, and how I seek to empathize across those barriers.

My students of color are increasingly questioning (again, the increase is likely in their vocalization of the questions rather than the existence of the questions) my ability to tell them anything about Latina/os (or any people of color) and looking for me to be an ally. I talk less and listen more, and I self-reflexively highlight and critique the power dynamics in the classroom. In my writing, too, I am trying to relinquish some power, to listen more and talk less—or, at least, to talk with less certainty and more curiosity. So I will stop talking now. I have much of my career ahead of me to learn. I remain *presente*, listening, and open to future revisions. This is an ongoing process.

Suzanne Bost is Professor of English, and Graduate Program Director in Women's Studies and Gender Studies, at Loyola University Chicago. She is the author of two books, *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850–2000* (2003) and *Encarnación: Illness and Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Literature* (2009), and she coedited, with Frances Aparicio, *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature* (2012). She has also published more than a dozen articles on *Latino/a Literature, Feminist Theory, and popular culture*. Her current work focuses the *Gloria Anzaldúa archive, Aurora Levins Morales, John Rechy, and posthumanism*.

Notes

1. Robyn Wiegman, among others, is critical of the limitations of assuming that the identity of the scholar must correspond directly to the field she studies: “identity studies are now sworn to an increasingly unsettling convergence: that to legitimately speak for an identity object of study one must be able to speak *as it*, even as such speaking threatens to strip subjects of epistemological authority over everything they are not” (2012, 7; original emphasis).

2. Of course there are a variety of intersecting identities within the category “Latina” and opportunities for filiation along shared lines of gender, sexuality, and religion. And to the extent that culture is fluid and detachable from identity, I have adopted many aspects of Latina/o culture. But in terms of personal and family ethnicity, the politics of language usage, and the visual morphologies of judgment based on skin color, the distinction between myself and Latinas is one I recognize and honor.

3. I appreciate the criticism that empathy too often resembles appropriation; as feminist philosopher Lorraine Code puts it, “[I]t is dangerous in affirming the center’s capacity to co-opt, appropriate, own the experiences and situations of Others” (2001, 270). More recently, in a broad interdisciplinary study of “the transnational politics of empathy,” Carolyn Pedwell proposes that we view empathy not as “affective access to ‘foreign’ psychic and cultural worlds and/or the production of emotional equivalence, but rather as a fluid assemblage of transnational processes involving difference, conflict, negotiation and, potentially, the creation of newness” (2014, 37). She posits an empathy premised on translation, which would, rather than assimilate the foreign to the familiar, “revise, restage, and open up cultural, social, and affective relations in ways that can be politically transformative” (37). I wish to practice this sort of empathy, giving up desire for cultural mastery or ownership. This kind of empathy, whether it be cross-cultural or with one who presumably shares one’s culture, is always decentered, reciprocal, dialogic, and permeable. It is also important to consider Sneja Gunew’s (2009) critique of the lack of attention to cultural particularity in most affect theory and her proposition that there is more than one variety of empathy based on the culture from which this feeling is derived.

4. In Sara Ahmed’s typically playful turn of phrase, “empathy sustains the very difference that it may seek to overcome: empathy remains a ‘wish feeling,’ in which subjects ‘feel’ something other than what another feels in the very moment of imagining they could feel what another feels” (2004, 30). This simultaneous preservation of difference and attempt at sharing feeling between subjects is what makes empathy more useful for me than identity.

5. I am using “Latina/o” in its broadest, trans-cultural and trans-racial sense. Sister Maryagnes worked with Puerto Ricans in Chicago, Mexicans in New Mexico, and people in Oaxaca who were almost certainly of mixed indigenous and mestizo [mixed-race] descent. My own work has focused on Chicana/os but has also included Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican-American, and Cuban-American history and writers.

6. “Nepantla” is originally a Nahuatl term for “middle” or “midst,” but Anzaldúa’s extensive use of it has shaped its contemporary usage in ways that might depart from the indigenous intent. I embrace her imaginative, cross-cultural repurposing of this term to facilitate feminist coalitions and figurative bridge building. “Haciendo mundo nuevo” literally translates to “making new world.”

7. Berlant draws from Barbara Johnson’s writing on apostrophe to point out the impossibility of true intersubjectivity and the cruelty of the suspended state of optimism involved in addressing an absent other. Apostrophe pretends to be “speaking for, as, and to, two: but only under the condition, and illusion, that the two are really (in) one” (2011, 26). Since Maryagnes herself will never respond to my letter, one might call it an apostrophe, but I prefer the epistolary framework because of its attachments to women’s writing and feminist literary criticism as well as its belief in an embodied interlocutor. Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* (2011) is another pertinent example of

an extended letter directed at a particular person (Coates's son Samori) in which the interlocutor never speaks but is invoked as a respondent. Though Sister Maryagnes is dead, this piece is a solicitation or invitation more than an address. My intention is to speak *toward* rather than *for* or *as*, which is why I don't include any hypothetical response to my letters. Maybe someone else will reply!

8. I still like Toni Morrison's account of whiteness, from *Playing in the Dark* (1993), best: whiteness is historically about power and freedom rather than ethnicity. Ethnically, I descend from formerly colonized or marginalized people (Irish, Jews, French Huguenots, and Athabasca "Indians"), but I identify as "white" in recognition of the unearned power my skin color affords me in not being subject to, for instance, racial profiling or expectations of having to serve as a model for my race. (Also see McIntosh 1990.)

9. See Bost 2015 for an explanation of the ways in which archives themselves alter and open texts more than simply preserving them as evidence of the past.

10. There is an extensive feminist critical discourse on letter writing and epistolary novels. See, for instance, Linda Kauffman's work (1986, 1992). One of Anzaldúa's most significant early pieces is "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers" (1983), in which she addresses her audience in letter form in order to create intimacy and collectivity.

11. I am thinking about Anzaldúa's theory of the borderlands here, where continual friction keeps all of the elements that meet at the border in a constant state of flux, producing new mixtures all the time (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). While Anzaldúa internalizes the US/Mexico borderlands as the "home" for her identity, my home is standing at the edge of these borderlands, a place I travel to rather than inhabiting indigenously.

12. Curran, "Autobiography," dated 1982, p. 3, box 1, folder 1, "Maryagnes Curran Papers," Loyola University of Chicago, Women and Leadership Archives.

13. Curran, Letter to Sister Doris, dated January 15, 1987, p. 4, box 1, folder 2.

14. Curran, Letter to Sister Doris, dated August 12, 1987, p. 2, box 1, folder 2.

15. In 1997, when Sister Maryagnes's truck engine died on the unmapped New Mexican mesa where she had been serving a colonia of Mexican nationals, the man who stopped to help called to her: "I know you, you are Sister Mary. You came to our trailer to visit us. You always help people here. You are the Missionary of the Mesa" (Curran, "News from the World of Sister Maryagnes Curran," sent to the Sisters of St. Francis Assisi on December 6, 1997, p. 2, box 1, folder 2).

16. Curran, Letter to Sisters and Associates, dated October 10, 1988, p. 1, box 1, folder 2.

17. In her play *Giving Up the Ghost*, Cherríe Moraga writes about "making familia from scratch" as a lesbian, building connections across biological families (1994, 35); this is the kind of family I embrace here.

18. Curran, Biographical materials, box 1, folder 1.

19. While "Hispanic" might have been the preferred term in the 1970s and 80s, I stick to the term favored politically in academia today: "Latina/o."

20. Curran, Letter to Sisters and Associates, dated July 6, 1987, p. 3, box 1, folder 2.

21. Anzaldúa, too, was critical of the limiting vocabulary for identity and ultimately resisted "identity boxes," calling for "less-rigid categorizations" and "a less-defended identity" based on connection and the "roots you share with all people and other beings" (Anzaldúa 2002, 560–61, 568, 571).

22. I'm referring here to Mary Douglas's theory of how standards of cleanliness are used to demarcate cultural barriers and to defend cultural purity; by this logic, dirt is "matter out of place," matter that crosses boundaries.

23. Curran, "Autobiography," dated 1982, p. 3, box 1, folder 1.

24. Curran, Untitled document, dated June 16, 1984, n.p., box 1, folder 2.

25. Curran, Letter to Sister Jeannine, dated July 4, 1984, n.p., box 1, folder 2.

26. Curran, "Autobiography," dated 1982, p. 3, box 1, folder 1. (Note: part of the bracketed word is cut off on the document available in the archive, but I'm fairly certain it is "passion.")

27. This four-page document was written in 1982, upon Sister Maryagnes's perceived completion of her mission in Chicago. It ends with feeling the call to go to Latin America and affiliating herself with the Maryknoll Sisters for this new mission. The document following this one in the archive is her passport with stamps from Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras (where she learned how to make the "solar box cookers" she helped to build later in New Mexico). It seems a bit odd to write an autobiography at this stage in her life, at age 51, prior to embarking on a new mission. Perhaps she really viewed this as the completion of one life and initiation of another.

28. Sister Maryagnes writes of a family in Woodstock, Illinois, who makes regular contributions for a family in Oaxaca. In exchange, this Mexican family maintains the garden and locks the doors at CEPIM ("Autobiography," dated 1982, p. 3, box 1, folder 1).

29. Curran, Letter to Sisters and Associates, dated October 10, 1988, p. 2, box 1, folder 2.

30. My translation from the original Spanish: "one of the things that I have learned during the time that I have been here in Mexico is the importance of *being present* with the Mexican people" (Curran, "Estar Presente," *Lazos entra las Americas*, dated Fall 1987, n.p., original emphasis, box 1, folder 5).

31. Curran, Letter to Sister Doris, dated December 18, 1987, p. 4, box 1, folder 2.

32. Curran, Letter to Sisters and Associates, dated October 10, 1988, p. 1, box 1, folder 2; and Letter to Sisters and Associates, dated December, 1989, n.p., box 1, folder 2.

33. There are copies of two first-person essays about the successes at CEPIM published, in 1991 and 1994, in *Women's Wisdom*, the newsletter of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi in Milwaukee. These essays—written for a broader audience of Catholics—contain more general reflections about the significance of Sister Maryagnes's work than the personal letters do.

34. There is a genre shift in the archive with the move to New Mexico in the 1990s: official reports and grant applications predominate rather than the informal letters to her order that record her early years in Mexico. I am inclined to attribute this shift to processes of saving and preserving (Sister Doris was likely an avid collector and preserver of letters she received from the flock in the 1980s) rather than some fundamental shift in Sister Maryagnes's orientation to the world, but who knows?

35. Curran, "News from the World of Sister Maryagnes Curran," dated December 6, 1997, p. 1, box 1, folder 2.

36. Curran, *Women's Wisdom* 1 (1) (1991): 1, box 1, folder 5.

37. Curran, "Blessed are the Poor," *The Albuquerque Tribune*, Thursday, December 16, 1999, box 1, folder 5.

38. Ibid.

39. Curran, "A Day in the Life of a Mary's Pence Ministry/The Pajarito Mesa, Albuquerque, New Mexico," undated, n.p., box 1, folder 4.

40. This is one of Anzaldúa's characteristic closings, translated literally as "with you," using the informal you to emphasize community with her audience.

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