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Renegotiating Liminal Spaces: Catholic Nuns as Spiritual and Feminist Activists

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Abstract

The objective of this thesis is to recognize the critical work being done by the women in two Sister-led organizations, Talitha Kum, and Network. Throughout this thesis, I make note of how the actions of these groups of nuns align with several values attributed to spiritual activism. Simultaneously, I discuss the complications that arise from doing social justice work within the confines of an institution that has perpetuated settler colonialism and white supremacy. My analysis is grounded in three theoretical frameworks; spiritual activist theory as articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa, Indigenous Feminism(s), and Womanism. In reference to the nuns status as both activists and committed Catholics, I explicitly call upon Anzaldúa's theories of Nepantla, Nepantleras, and Nos/Otras ideology to argue that multiple truths can exist at once.

Introduction.1:

Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activist Framework

Spiritual activism as a theoretical framework very much relies on the knowledge and work created by feminist, womanist, and Chicana scholar Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa, born in 1942, produced scholarship that centered her identity and embodied location(s). Throughout this chapter, I discuss some of the most pivotal concepts in Anzaldúan theory, as well as how these concepts have worked to create the holistic framework of spiritual activism.

Given that Anzaldúa was born and grew up in the Río Grande Valley of South Texas, an area located between the U.S./Mexico border, her relationship to borders and border identity is foundational to her work. That being said, if one was to explain Anzaldúan theory in a sentence, it could be described as scholarship that lifts up border identity to explain how race, social class, and gender work together to inform one's worldview. Specifically, Anzaldúa focuses on those living between borders, or in liminal zones. When Anzaldúa discusses borders, she moves from an examination of literal borders to other forms of borders/boundaries. For example, Anzaldúa most often focuses on spiritual boundaries, or material boundaries that arise from interlocking systems of oppression. Similarly, living in-between these other borders also creates liminal zones. This idea of liminality is explained in more depth through her theory of nepantla, which I discuss in section Intro.2.

Anzaldúa's border theory is also supported by her work on the geography of selves. Not only do borders shape our identities, but our identities shape our lived experiences. This ideology overlaps with what is referred to as intersectionality, a term coined by feminist legal scholar

Kimberlé Crenshaw[1], and a methodology that has been utilized and explored for decades by women of color, particularly Black women.[2] However, Anzaldúa's thoughts on this matter slightly differ from the normative assumptions that undergird intersectionality. Anzaldúa believes that identity shapes how you are perceived, and that embracing and connecting with one's identity is an embodied activity (Anzaldúa 2015, 66). This understanding is key to spiritual activist theory, as Anzaldúa and several other spiritual activists and spiritual activist scholars agree that the body is a site of knowledge production. Additionally, the body must be valued as a site of knowledge production *equal* to the mind.

Understanding our bodies as sites of knowledge production is an act that, according to Anzaldúa, can lead us closer to recognizing our global interconnectedness. A theory that can aid readers in understanding the bridge between embodiment and interconnectedness is new tribalism. In *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Identity*, Anzaldúa states, "This new tribalism, like other new Chicano/Latino narratives, recognizes that we are responsible participants in the ecosystems (complete set of interrelationships between a network of living organisms and their physical habitats) in whose web we're individual strands" (Anzaldúa 2015, 67). Anzaldúa utilizes this theory of new tribalism, as well as metaphors of her own body as a tree, to demonstrate how the multiple physical aspects, experiences, and identities situated within our bodies work together to produce energies that can be transferred between all beings and things. Anzaldúa also places added emphasis on the locations we've lived in and settled in, and how these physical places impact our bodies, and add to our interwoven branches of El Arbol de la Vida (the tree of life).

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[1] Crenshaw. 2016. *TEDTalks: Kimberlé Crenshaw: The Urgency of Intersectionality*. TED.
[2] Examples include bell hooks' 1981 book Ain't I a Woman, Sojourner Truths' 1851 speech "Ain't I a Woman", and the 1977 statement by the Combahee River Collective. Each of these sources appears in the works cited section of this thesis.

When we work to uncover the depth of knowledge innate in our bodies and minds, we also work to understand new epistemologies, and new methods of problem solving and methods for social justice. For example, Anzaldúa describes the spiritual knowledge that lies within our bodies as Conocimiento. Conocimiento can also be described as a transitional process, or a period of inquiry, and healing. Once we are awakened to our Conocimientos, we can truly begin to understand and visualize the importance of spiritual activism. To quote,

> Conocimiento urges us to respond not just with the traditional practice of spirituality (contemplation, meditation, and private rituals) or with the technologies of political activism (protests, demonstrations, and speak outs), but with the amalgam of the two: spiritual activism, which we've also inherited along with la sombra (Anzaldúa 2015, 19).

Anzaldúa discusses the concept of Conocimiento more thoroughly in her 2002 book, *This Bridge We Call Home*, and specifically in her essay "Now Let Us Shift …Conocimiento…Inner Work, Public Acts." In the essay "Gloria E. Anzaldúa's Decolonizing Ritual de Conocimiento", scholar Sarah S. Ohmer further interprets Anzaldúa's key theory. Ohmer elaborates on Anzaldúa's words, explaining that constant questioning and critiquing of what is considered to be "the norm" is key to Conocimiento. This questioning can often result in feelings of isolation from the systems of power you ascribe to. Ohmer's article is important to my analysis of Anzaldúa's Conocimiento as Ohmer sheds new light on Anzaldúa's understanding that Conocimiento can facilitate discomfort, or even pain. Simultaneously, Ohmer describes how those who are existing at the border of Conocimiento in many ways, can also build stronger community with one another. The community aspect of Conocimiento is one I will discuss further in section 2.2 in relation to the work being done by the ▯▯isters▯▯at the nonprofit Network. In *This Bridge We Call Home,* Anzaldúa also discusses the role that walls or borders play in maintaining and

afflicting violence. Conocimiento is a unique and embodied knowledge that can create new pathways between borders that, in turn, can work to dismantle border violence. While Conocimiento can instigate discomfort, it is also a knowledge that both inspires and is fueled by love.

Conocimiento occurs in stages. To briefly elaborate on these stages, I look once again both towards *This Bridge we Call Home* and the aforementioned essay by scholar Sarah S. Ohmer. The first stage is referred to as un darse cuenta, or a call to adventure. The second stage is referred to as la nepantla. I will be discussing this stage in particular in section Intro.2, as it is key to the foundation of this thesis. Stage three is called La Coatlicue. It is known as a period of darkness. This stage also asks us to critique the idea that Western scientific medicine and theories are our only possible source to solve social and cultural ills. Stage four, which is integral to spiritual activist theory, is a reconnection of the mind and body. This stage is particularly unique as it calls attention to how the western academy has often devalued the knowledge we refer to as intuition or emotion, as well as the knowledge that can manifest in our bodies in physical and non-physical ways after living through trauma. The fifth stage involves a new desire of purpose and meaning, and the sixth stage features sharing this new purpose and meaning with others. While the interpersonal nature of stage six may create conflict, or a "clash of realities" as named by both Anzaldúa and Ohmer, stage seven relies upon finding common ground. What is key to these stages is that while there may be a form of order here, the stages can also be experienced fluidly, and repeatedly.

Furthermore, on the subject of self-knowledge, Anzaldúa theorizes that those who have been disembodied, scarred, or forced into the margins of society by hegemonic systems of power often hold a type of knowledge Anzaldúa refers to as La Facultad. It should be noted that La

Facultad was a key concept in Anzaldúa's well known book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. La Facultad reminds us of the importance of feminist standpoint theory, or the understanding that we are the most knowledgeable sources on our own lives. The understanding that all beings have access to spiritual knowledge is critical when performing spiritual activism. In other words, if Conocimiento is what inspires spiritual activism, then it is clear that both Conocimiento *and* La Facultad are necessary in the process of unlocking a global spiritual shift. This shift is meant to place humanity one step further in achieving a key goal of spiritual activism, recognizing our interconnectedness. It is spiritual activists' belief that if humanity can recognize our interconnectedness, we can then use that knowledge to lead us closer to justice, liberation, and human flourishing. To break this process down, Conocimiento leaves us conscious of spirit in the world, and spirit in ourselves. This spirit, in turn, lets us become conscious of our wounds, giving us the opportunity to focus our energies on healing said wounds. When we begin the process of healing our wounds, we can then begin the process of self-transformation.

When discussing healing processes, I would be remiss not to discuss Anzaldúa's Coyolxauhqui Imperative. In *Light in the Dark*, Gloria Anzaldúa recounts an Aztec myth of Coyolxauhqui, a Goddess of the moon who in the story was torn limb from limb. Anzaldúa uses this story to describe the disembodiment that can result from systemic oppression such as cultural discrimination and isolation, white supremacy, racism, and settler colonialism. She describes the Coyolxauhqui imperative as a method of healing from these particular wounds that leave those with these lived experiences feeling fragmentary. Coyolxauhqui imperative centers the necessary transformation that is required to restore "Inner completeness". Self-transformation, inspired by self-reflection, is foundational to the goals of spiritual activism.

Throughout her several works, Anzaldúa constantly reminds readers that we cannot fully be present to connect with others until we have an understanding of our personal identities, traumas, and knowledges. Once we transform ourselves, we can then begin working towards a global transformation, or to reference back to Conocimiento, a global shift.

Key to this shift towards interconnectedness is being able to bridge across difference. The concept of a bridge is centered within much of Anzaldúan thought. Gloria Anzaldúa states, "The bridge (boundary between the world you've just left and the one ahead) is both a barrier and a point of transformation" (Anzaldúa 2015, 137). Aided by Conocimiento, bridges are utilized within our self-transformation, but they are also utilized in our connections and relationships with others. A necessary step to creating these external bridges is to bear witness to the experiences of others. Bearing witness is a practice that centers actively and deeply listening to the experiences and stories of others without an end goal in mind. In other words, bearing witness occurs without the assumption that by the end of the exchange you will be able to fully understand that person's experience. Instead, bearing witness lets us open windows into the lived experiences of others, which in turn can help us form beloved community, a concept articulated by feminist scholar bell hooks in many of her works, including her 2012 conversation with scholar and activist George Brosi. To restate, bearing witness advances the practice of bridging across difference. In bridging across difference, we can build community. Each of these steps, once again, is critical in establishing a transformed world that forefronts spirit, liberation, justice, and love.

Situated within Anzaldúas theories of personal and world transformation is nos/otras ideology. Nos/otras ideology is Anzaldúa's answer to the 'us vs them' or 'self vs other' binaries that are often created and reinforced by colonial white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Anzaldúa states, “We are both nos (us) and otras (others)--nos/otras” (Anzaldúa 2015, 63). To elaborate on this concept, Anzaldúa offers her understanding that ‘us’ and ‘them’ are not opposing sides, but instead, she proposes the idea that we are both us and them at once. The theory also recognizes that dismantling binary points of view does not overlook the inherent fact that each person on this planet has different lived experiences, but instead offers us the opportunity to once again, bear witness to these experiences, and to also value the commonalities we share. Relatedly, El Mundo Zurdo is an Anzaldúan concept that often goes overlooked, but I believe is key to this particular conversation. El Mundo Zurdo, or the Left Hand world, is a concept that describes the ability of different marginalized communities to share ideas and concerns in order to dismantle systems of oppression. El Mundo Zurdo relies on the processes of embracing liminality, sharing knowledge, and bridging across difference, therefore aiding the goals of spiritual activism by centering embracing difference and valuing similarities. Those living in El Mundo Zurdo use their lived experiences to produce and access knowledge that can liberate themselves, with the understanding that this will eventually contribute to the goal of liberating all.

Introduction.2:

Nepantla and Nepantleras

A principal focus in this paper requires the knowledge of one of Anzaldúa’s most famous concepts, nepantla, and subsequently, nepantleras. As stated in section Intro.1, Anzaldúa explains how borders, geographical or otherwise, shape our identities and therefore shape our life experiences. More pointedly, she speaks on how living in spaces *between* borders, or in liminal zones, can create both external and internal conflict for those existing in said spaces. This is where nepantla theory becomes exceptionally relevant. Nepantla spaces are often places where

conflict is produced by living "in-between." Additionally, nepantla spaces can be physical, psychic or both. In the end, this conflict produced by living in between physical and metaphysical borders can lead those existing in nepantla to a greater spiritual knowledge. To once again quote Anzaldúa, "By attending to the stream of mental experience, one becomes aware of the connective tissue, nepantla, the bridge between the compartments or, to use Santa Teresa of Avila's phrase, between the "'mansions' of the self" (Anzaldúa 2015, 28). Similar to the overarching goals of spiritual activism, Anzaldúa's goal in introducing this theory is to aid the process of physical decolonization, while also helping others to decolonize their inner selves. It should also be noted that by physical decolonization I am referring to both the decolonization of nations and land, as well as decolonization of the physical body. She explains that in nepantla spaces, or places of internal conflict, transformations can occur. Much like Conocimiento, or La Facultad, nepantla is another facet of spiritual activism that acts as a bridge.

What Anzaldúa calls a nepantlera is an individual who has experienced this liminal zone, is constantly making the journey to each side, and is therefore uniquely qualified to act as a mediator on another person's nepantla journey. On nepantleras, Anzaldúa writes, "nepantleras are not constrained by one culture or world but experience multiple realities… [they] use competing systems of knowledge and rewrite their identities" (Anzaldúa 2015, 82). Nepantleras are uniquely equipped with spiritual knowledge given, as Anzaldúa stated above, their ability to employ their multiple realities to rewrite their identities. Furthermore, nepantleras are constantly challenging the individualistic ideals of the western world. This unique knowledge they possess can help lead us towards new systems that promote an ecosystem of community care. Nepantleras are often those we look to for guidance in navigating our transit between borders, as they themselves have successfully navigated this journey. Anzaldúa also describes las

nepantleras as spiritual activists who are simultaneously focused on achieving social justice, and personal spiritual transformation.

Transitioning to how these concepts apply to my research, several of the nuns I discuss here are in constant negotiations with their identities that have been defined by gender, race, ethnicity, and their commitment to the Catholic church. Thus, I argue that many of these Sisters exist in liminal, conflicting zones of being. In this thesis , through an exploration of case studies of specific Catholic sisters, I ask whether the figure of the Nepantlera is embodied by some or all of these activist nuns, and if so, how.

Introduction.3:

Indigenous Feminism(s) and Indigenous Spiritual Activism

In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa coined the term "Spiritual Activism" to describe an activist framework that centers self-reflection, mindfulness, and bridging across difference. While Anzaldúa coined the term and contributed critical work to the field, praxis that can fall under the category of spiritual activism has roots in several theoretical frameworks. In this section, I summarize the ways in which Indigenous feminist scholars have contributed to the field of spiritual activism. I also explore the ways in which spiritual activism itself relies on, and employs the theories and practices of Indigenous scholars and Indigenous activists.

To begin, it is important to define Indigenous feminism. To do so appropriately, I look towards the book *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture* by Shari M Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack. The authors state, "[Indigenous feminism is] a study of gender struggle that engages the crucial issues of cultural identity, nationalism, and decolonization particular to Indigenous contexts (Huhndorf and Suzack 2010, 2). Huhndorf and Suzack go on to say,

> The need to address the urgent social, economic, and political problems confronting Indigenous women remains critical. However, these problems stem from ongoing colonial practices of the dominant culture and, at times, from the internal dynamics of Indigenous communities. We propose Indigenous feminism as a rubric under which political and social organizing can and should take place. Yet, a single, normative definition of Indigenous feminism remains impossible because Indigenous women's circumstances vary enormously throughout colonizing societies, where patriarchy dominates, and in Indigenous communities with distinct historical and cultural traditions (Huhndorf and Suzack 2010, 2).

A key component to Huhndorf and Suzack's definition is that Indigenous feminism is not one monolithic set of beliefs. This led me to the conclusion that when writing about an Indigenous feminist framework, it would actually be more accurate to describe these set beliefs as Indigenous feminism(s). Additionally, it is crucial to understand that centered within Indigenous feminism(s) is the urgent need to end and reverse colonization and settler colonialism. This concept is discussed in Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang's 2012 article titled "Decolonization is not a Metaphor". These intentions are unique to Indigenous feminism(s) given the history of violence and genocide that Indigenous communities and peoples have faced for centuries. Additionally, within this framework one can find commonalities with the spiritual activist understanding of nepantla, and the spiritual activist goal of a global interconnectedness, achieved by bearing witness to the experiences of others (among other strategies).

Keeping this in mind when beginning to understand these ideologies, one must first understand that spiritual activism relies on knowledge production methodologies that often lie outside of normative western academic methodologies, as do the epistemologies of Indigenous

feminism(s). For example, in “Spiritual Beginnings of Indigenous Women’s Activism”, scholars Judy Iseke and Leisa Desmoulins highlight the Métis storytelling methodology. This custom is a cultural tradition that also serves as an activist practice fore-fronted by Métis women, and Métis elders. Furthermore, the authors explain how storytelling is a Métis way of knowing and sharing knowledge, and specifically, it is a practice and tradition that prioritizes Métis agency. Indigenous communities, including the Métis, have incorporated their own epistemologies into their activist practices. For example, Iseke and Desmoulins highlight acts of Indigenous socio-economic activism and political activism of the 1960s and 70s. The authors write that during this time, Métis women formed agencies founded in Métis tradition and Métis activist practices such as the Métis Association. The association worked to affect public policy changes resulting in improved living conditions in Métis communities.

Additionally, given that decolonization is centered within much of Indigenous feminist thought, Indigenous feminism(s) can also be classified as theory that operates outside of neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism. To reference Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell's 1994 article, “Jungle-law breaks out: Neoliberalism and global–local disorder”, Neoliberalism can be defined in short as the “roll-back” of social welfare programs and the “roll-out” of increased disciplining and surveillance of the poor. In the essay “The State is not a Saviour” from *Making space for Indigenous feminism*, scholar Isabel Altamirano-Jiminéz explains how Indigenous feminist theory must be prioritized over the neoliberal state when it comes to Indigenous liberation. To quote,

> Neoliberalism has involved the reorganization of society along the lines of decentralization, the restructuring of the state, the affirmation of basic human rights, the attempt to redirect social policy and the development of civil society and social capital.

> As part of neo-liberal multiculturalism (Hale 2005) legal/rights recognition is structured within the overall goals of the state not towards the goals of Indigenous communities" (Altamirano-Jiminéz 2017, 221).

Indigenous activist theory explicitly operating outside of a neoliberal society is important to note given how the goals of spiritual activism prioritize the needs of communities, as opposed to prioritizing the individual. An example of Indigenous feminist thought in practice is the formation and continuation of mutual aid communities. Marginalized communities including certain Indigenous communities have been practicing mutual aid for centuries. Within this overlap, we can see how spiritual activist theory is informed by Indigenous feminists and Indigenous activists.

An additional commonality between spiritual activism and Indigenous feminist thought is that both agree on the fact that theory and activism cannot be separated, and both must be understood and work in conjunction with one another in order to achieve liberation. Furthermore, spirituality and Indigenous feminism(s) often cannot be separated given the Indigenous feminist values of protecting and understanding the environment and the Indigenous feminist goals of decolonization and securing land rights. These values and goals very much reinforce one another. Altamirano-Jiminéz makes clear is that the ongoing alienation of Indigenous communities from their land is not an isolated act of violent discrimination, but is very much connected to the common colonization tactic of attempting to separate Indigenous communities from their culture. Within spiritual activist theory, the understanding that protecting the Earth is very much tied to the spiritual and physical survival of humanity can be traced back to Indigenous scholarship and tradition. Looking towards an example of this theory in action, Yitazba Largo-Anderson, in her essay "Spiritual Essentialism at Standing Rock", familiarizes

readers with the Water Protectors at the Standing Rock Reservation, and their acts of spiritual activism to protect their community against the Dakota Access Pipeline. To elaborate on those spiritual practices, many of the Water Protectors at Standing Rock were exercising prayer. This type of prayer is not the one many in the West are familiar with, i.e., Christian prayer, but instead, this form of prayer is spoken with the intention of affecting energies. It is central in both Indigenous feminist theory and Womanist theory that all beings and objects on this Earth contain energies. These energies can be transferred, and the Indigenous prayer utilized at the 2017 Standing Rock demonstrations very much reflected this ideology. While referencing the social media attention Standing Rock received, Largo-Anderson also describes the purpose of the Standing Rock prayer practices: “Water Protectors used social media to describe the meaning of prayer at Standing Rock as a resistance to the pipeline and a way to protect our mother, the Earth" (2017, 6). Once again, the importance of the environment in spiritual activism ties back to Indigenous and Womanist spiritual activism theory, just as does the understanding that everything that exists contains energy, and therefore has a vibration that can be transferred between beings. This ideology also reflects Anzaldúa’s theory of new tribalism which I have cited and described above.

To conclude, Indigenous feminists remind us that neoliberalism, capitalism, as well as colonization and environmental degradation are all connected. These are all understandings that spiritual activist theory in many ways echoes. However, it is important to include Indigenous feminism(s) as unique theoretical frameworks within this paper given the new and differing understandings these frameworks produce. Furthermore, it is key in understanding how spiritual activist theory itself relies upon ideologies that are foundational to Indigenous feminisms, and certain Indigenous communities.

Introduction.4:

Womanism

The third theoretical framework I use as a foundation to this thesis is Womanism. Womanism is a field of thought created by Black women that centers the goal of equity and justice for all people *through* the liberation of Black people and people of color. In her piece, "Ebuhlanti Amandla Ngawethu: Womanism and Black Theology of Liberation, in Memory of Vuyani Shadrack Vellem" scholar Fundiswa A. Kobo states, "Womanism is a comprehensive epistemological agency for black personhood, inspired by a philosophy that celebrates black roots (Ogunyemi 1985), African culture and the ideals of life and faith for black people (Kobo 2018a)" (Kobo 2020, 2). The term "Womanism" itself was coined by author and scholar Alice Walker in 1983, and the Womanist worldview has been expanding and transforming since. Gloria Anzaldúa herself has been referred to as a Womanist scholar, as she pens work *from* the standpoint view of, and *for* women of color. It should be noted that Womanism as a body of theory houses the work of several prominent scholars who offer distinct ideas and additions to this worldview. However, for the purposes of my thesis, I focus on the work of scholar Layli Maparyan.

One of the many characteristics that sets Womanism apart from other bodies of theory such as feminism or Black feminism, is that Womanism has a major connection to spirit and spirituality. In *The Womanist Idea*, Layli Maparyan states that a Womanist worldview (*she explicitly uses the term worldview as opposed to ideology*) is rooted in "the lived experience of survival, community building, intimacy with the natural environment, health, healing, and personal growth among everyday people from all walks of life, and articulated primarily but not exclusively by women of color from all around the world, and now a gift to all humanity"

(Maparyan 2011, 33). Following this idea, Maparyan also defines a Womanist perspective of spiritual activism, explaining that "spiritual activism is a set of practices designed to change "hearts and minds" in ways that promote optimal well-being in individuals, communities, humanity as a whole, all living kind, and ultimately Planet Earth" (Maparyan 2011, 117). A few key concepts tied to Womanist spirituality and Womanist spiritual activism that are integral to this thesis include; the importance of language in social justice work, accessing spiritual knowledge in our heart-mind nexus, and the theory of radical interrelatedness.

Layli Maparyan discusses how crucial the language we choose to use is to social justice advocacy and especially to spiritual activism. For example, her approach to labeling Womanism as a worldview as opposed to an ideology is very intentional. Language can be used to promote an elitist, western academic agenda. Conversely, it can be used to reconstruct how scholars consider academia, and enhance the possibility of using academia as a tool for liberation. That being said, language choice is as important in academia as it is in activism. Once again, this is shown through the above-mentioned example of demonstrators at Standing Rock to label themselves as Water Protectors, as opposed to referring to themselves as "protestors". This ideology is due to the fact that both Womanism and spiritual activism center love and interrelatedness within their activist efforts, and distance themselves from terms that may promote hostility, or false binaries. Given this, throughout this thesis I pay close attention to the language utilized by the nuns I'm studying, as well as the language I myself use to describe their spiritual activist advocacy efforts.

Referencing the key work of scholar AnaLouise Keating, Maparyan references Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of Conocimiento, as described above. Conocimiento connects to the Womanist worldview given that both concepts are based around the idea that key knowledge lies

in our heart-mind nexus. Both concepts also acknowledge that being in tune with our bodies, as well as our minds, allows us to understand and exchange vibrations with one another to work towards community building. To explain the concept of vibration further, Maparyan states that the site of origin for spiritual activist work lies within us. This is supported by the fact that in the Womanist worldview, everything is energy, and with that energy comes a vibration. To quote Maparyan directly, "spiritual activism is the conscious transformation of vibration" (Maparyan 2011, 122). Due to the fact that every being, both living and nonliving, contains an energy, a mutual respect is born for all things on Earth. To aid her description of this key concept, Maparyan discusses the role of the African principle of Ntuology, or "interconnected spiritual networks" (Maparyan 2011, 40). Stemming from Ntuology is the concept of spiritual constructionism. Not only does spiritual constructionism reinforce the Ntuologist belief that spiritual networks exist, but Maparyan also informs readers that spiritual constructionism, similar to social constructionism, asserts that there is a structure to the process of creation. This, in turn, means that there is a structure to our energies and vibration that is not essence, but is informed through the material world. In other words, while all beings may contain spiritual knowledge, what that spiritual knowledge is and how we access it can depend on our lived experiences and identities.

This notion then contributes to Maparyan's ideas on radical interrelatedness, which are also foundational to Womanist epistemology. Radical interrelatedness is the understanding that every action we perform not only affects us, but also those around us and our communities. While this concept has similarities to Anzaldúa's theory of interconnectedness, what is key to the Womanist view of interrelatedness is the Womanist value of reverence. On reverence Maparyan states, "As a feeling, reverence combines awe, respect, love, and veneration" (Maparyan 2011,

45). Reverence can be tied back to the mutual respect born out of the awareness of our energies and vibrations. In other words, reverence is not only a tool to aid our understanding of the experiences of others, but also promotes the respect, care, and nurturance of those different experiences. As a mindset, reverence promotes care for ourselves, care for others, care for the earth, and supports the process of internal healing.

Perhaps most importantly, Womanist theory helps people understand knowledge production outside of colonial forms of research and academia. According to Maparyan, within Womanism it is understood that all knowledge is to be validated through community consensus. This is key, as validating knowledge through community agreement not only is anti-colonial, but also aids the spiritual activist value of centering the community over the individual. Continuing the discussion of Womanism used in knowledge production, Womanist research methodologies have inspired scholars to discuss the many present Womanist interpretations of biblical texts. For example, Womanist theologist and scholar Wil Gafney offers readers a Womanist interpretation of the Bible. In particular Gafney focuses on centering Biblical stories of Black women in both Jewish and Christian texts and traditions. In her piece, "A Womanist midrash of delilah: don't hate the playa hate the Game", Gafney discusses agency and naming through her Womanist interpretation of the Old Testament. Throughout her work, Gafney prompts audiences to reconsider how we obtain knowledge and through what means, and to reconsider what forms of knowledge everyday people and scholars accept as "the most correct." In regards to the biblical Sarah, Gafney also critically analyzes the practice of naming in Biblical texts, naming in greater mainstream Western culture, and what naming means in relation to Womanism. In discussing the Hebrew Bible, and specifically the story of Samson and Sarah and their journey of progeny, she states,

> Curiously, only this woman has her name stripped from her. Yet she does not fade easily into the background. She continues in the story beyond minimal announcements of conception and birth that have become the biblical standard for so many nameless women. The traditional way to name her as the subject of her own story in the larger story is to call her by name. Naming is a fundamental womanist practice from remembering the dead in Africana liturgies with the refrain, "ashé, we call your name" to the current "say her name" commitment of the #Blacklivesmatter movement to keep the names of black women who have been killed at the center of the conversation (Gafney 2016, 55).

While this thesis is about spirituality more than it is about religion, I would be remiss to ignore the commitment to Catholicism by the nuns I'm exploring. Therefore, Gafney's work assists my thesis in offering a possible bridge between spirituality and religion through the means of considering methods of knowledge production and acquisition.

Ultimately, Womanism offers a theoretical framework that forefronts the experiences of Black women, and women of color. It vanguards spirituality, community, and love, in both activism and scholarship. Thus, Womanism is key in understanding the actions of the Sisters in my case studies, and determining whether or not their actions fall under the category of spiritual activism. What will be important to remember for this thesis is that Womanism was created by and for women of color, specifically Black women. Therefore, while I will be making connections between the actions of the Sisters at the center of my case studies and spiritual activism based on what Womanist scholarship defines as such, I will not be naming any of the sisters I study as Womanists if that is not an identifier they have already chosen for themselves.

Introduction.5:

A Broader Understanding of Spiritual Activist Theory

In this section, I conclude my discussion of the theoretical framework I will be utilizing within my case studies. Once again, those frameworks are; the original spiritual activist framework theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa and expanded on by AnaLouise Keating, Indigenous feminism(s), and Womanism. Within these frameworks, I believe it is important to continue to point out where certain concepts overlap and intersect, while of course still recognizing that these theories' origins come from distinct places and experiences.

To begin, as mentioned in section Intro.1, one of Anzaldúa's key theories is Nos/Otras ideology. To briefly recap, Anzaldúa offers her understanding that 'us' and 'them' are not opposing sides, but instead, we are both us and them at once. This theory then contributes to one of Anzaldúa's broader concepts, "inner work, public acts" or the idea that we must be self-reflexive in order to ethically perform social justice work. In *The Womanist Idea*, Layli Maparyan offers a Womanist response to this theory. In the Womanist worldview, Maparyan names the spiritual activist idea of working on the inner self in order to better help others as performing miracles. The author explains that in Womanism, there are two key steps to performing miracles, and both mutually reinforce each other. Similar to Anzaldúa's conceptualization, the first step is to change yourself (inner work), and the second is to change the world (outer work). Maparyan demonstrates this methodology through her discussion of five case studies, all of different spiritual activists across the globe. One I found to be particularly impactful was that of Immaculée Ilibagiza. Ilibagiza is a spiritual activist who also happens to be a survivor of the Rwandan genocide that occurred during the mid-nineties. Ilibagiza's spirituality has roots in Catholicism, and her methods of activism have very apparent ties to Anzaldúa's work on spiritual activism, as well as ties to ideologies found within Indigenous feminism(s).

Namely, through her story, Ilibagiza demonstrated the ability to transform anger into forgiveness and love. Ilibagiza also expressed her thoughts on prayer, stating that "prayer is a human energetic communication with a responsive energy-filled universe." (Maparyan 2011, 183). Here we can see specific commonalities between the two frameworks of Indigenous Feminism(s) and Womanism as both center prayer as a spiritual practice which can be used to achieve spiritual consciousness. It should once again be noted that both frameworks are born out of unique epistemologies from two different marginalized groups that experience interlocking systems of oppression differently. Certain scholars utilizing both frameworks view prayer as a practice that can be used while working towards the self-reflection stage of spiritual activism, as well as an activist tactic.

Moreover, Layli Maparyan lists and repeats the values of Womanism throughout *The Womanist Idea*. She describes these values as four key areas of concern for Womanists: personal concern, community concern, environmental concern, and spiritual concern. I believe that these four categories overlap with values and concepts invoked by Indigenous feminism(s) and in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. For example, one aspect of Indigenous feminism(s) that sets this body of theory apart from other feminisms is Indigenous feminists' critical focus on ending and reversing colonization, settler colonialism, and the white supremacy that stems from, and is perpetuated by these violent processes. This goal connects well with the four values of Womanism, as being an anti-colonialist requires constant self-reflexivity, community building, environmental justice, and an understanding of spirituality.

The human body as a site of spiritual knowledge is another commonality between these frameworks, though, once again, all stem from different cultural traditions. For example and as previously mentioned, Anzaldúa describes our innate spiritual knowledge as Conocimiento. In

drawing a connection between Conocimiento and Womanism, Layli Maparyan explains a Womanist approach to a similar thought process, that key knowledge lies in our heart-mind nexus, and that being in tune with our bodies as well as our minds allows us to understand and exchange vibrations with one another to work towards community building. On the topic of vibration, as referenced in Intro.3, some Indigenous feminists also believe that we are born with a vibration that can be transferred between all beings on the Earth, living and nonliving. Anzaldúa also discusses this concept in both *This Bridge We Call Home*, and *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*. Overall, based on the authors I've read, all are in agreement that these different forms of spiritual bodily knowledge are necessary to liberate marginalized groups of people from colonialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Finally, a clear through-line in each of these theories is that all aim for a post-oppositional world. To elaborate, a goal named in each of the above bodies of theory is to move past binary categorizations of 'us and them', and to create liminal zones where more nuanced, and unique ideologies can live and operate. Given that this is one commonality between these frameworks, a commitment to a post-oppositional viewpoint and way of living is a key criteria I will be using to evaluate the nuns I am studying both as Spiritual Activists, and as nepantleras. In this project, I strive to view particular Catholic Sisters through the lens of bodies of theory that lie outside of traditional binaries perpetuated by white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. Moreover, post-oppositionality will be a concept discussed further in the conclusion of this thesis.

Given that these theoretical frameworks advocate for social justice work *outside* of systems of domination, viewing a subject invested in a system that has utilized their power for social control, such as an organized religion (and particularly Catholicism) through this outside

lens can be potentially problematic. On this, I look towards a quote by scholar Jessica Sadr in her dissertation titled *Gloria Anzaldúa's Womanist Idea*. In her dissertation, Sadr states, "Womanism reaches beyond religion to enhance wellness for all people of all faiths, as well as those with whom spirituality does not resonate" (Sadr 2018, 15). I intend to look at the actions of the Sisters I am studying in hopes of understanding how said actions reflect the theory as discussed throughout this introduction. In other words, I examine these women's actions to determine how they align with spiritual activism, while also recognizing their conflicting identity as religious leaders within a religious institution that has, in its long history, perpetuated colonization. Additionally, I apply this theory to these women's work in the hopes of gaining a broader understanding of spiritual activist practice, as well as working towards dismantling the binary of spirituality and religion. Throughout my research, I work to understand and determine if there is a liminal space where these women can be both committed to Catholicism, and work towards communal liberation.

Furthermore, this project relies on bodies of theory that operate outside of what is considered "traditional" within Western scholarship. Given this, I believe that feminist research methods and methodologies must be utilized in order to appropriately conduct research on this topic. In my next chapter, I elaborate on the methods used throughout my research, and why I have specifically chosen to utilize a mix of research methods that span across humanities, social science, and feminist research.

Chapter 1:

Epistemologies, Methodologies, & Methods

Epistemologies

In this chapter, I outline and describe the methods used throughout my research. I begin, by briefly explaining the epistemologies and methodologies centered in this project that also inform my choice of methods.

Epistemologies, as opposed to epistemology, is a keyword in this thesis. Within scientific research, a traditional concept utilized by researchers is the belief that there is only one truth, and one scientific answer to each of "life's big questions". What makes feminist research so exciting is that feminist researchers challenge the idea of "one truth" and consider the possibility of multiple truths and multiple answers existing at once. This leads to the idea of multiple epistemologies, or ways of knowing and knowledge creation, that I will be referencing throughout this thesis. These epistemologies both stem from, and contribute to the three frameworks I have described in my introduction. Each of these epistemologies are grounded in feminist standpoint theory, or the belief that when you are researching a particular group of people of a shared social location, those that operate and live within said social location are the experts of their own experience.

Feminist standpoint theory calls attention to the culture and environments we exist within, and how systems of oppression and domination work in tandem to shape our life experiences. On feminist standpoint theory, feminist scholars Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven say this, "[Feminist standpoint theory is] an argument that when women recognize and confront the systems that keep them oppressed, they can understand that oppression from the perspective of who they are" (Davis, Craven 2016, 26). As such, the standpoint theory

exemplified throughout this paper is also the theory at the heart of Indigenous feminism(s), Womanism, and Chicana feminism which informs Gloria Anzaldúa's spiritual activist framework. It should be noted that while standpoint theory informs these frameworks to create epistemologies, I, the author and primary researcher, am not a member of the social locations being represented. Therefore, while these epistemologies inform my methodologies and methods, I will not be contributing new knowledge to epistemologies that operate outside of my own standpoint view.

Methodologies

While feminist standpoint theory works to inform my research epistemologies, the epistemologies, in turn, work to inform my methodologies. Given that the epistemologies I'm studying rely on dismantling capitalistic binaries and undoing the harmful effects of colonization, I feel as though it is important to define what a decolonizing research methodology entails. As is well known, social science research within the confines of Western academia has historically led to less-than-liberatory results. It is a much-too-common occurrence that research centering marginalized communities has directly contributed to these communities' objectification. This has in turn increased the oppression and violence said communities have faced and continue to experience. Therefore, decolonizing research methodologies aim to dismantle the harmful power dynamic within researcher/subject relationships that perpetuates this harm, and instead to reframe the role of the subject as a co-knowledge producer, and as a person with particular epistemic knowledge that the researcher may not have. One example of a research method that utilizes a decolonizing methodology is arts-based research. Within arts-based research, researchers look at work produced by their co-knowledge producers with an aim to bear witness to their experiences, as opposed to gaining perfect or complete understanding and

expertise about their subjects. My reason for describing decolonizing research methodologies is two-fold. First, it would be negligent to dismiss the subject of decolonization within research given the liberatory nature of my theoretical frameworks and epistemologies. Second, I want to draw attention to the fact that I have not used any explicit anti-colonial methods in my research, rather I have used this methodology as a lens and framework for determining the methods that were appropriate for this project. To elaborate, while a decolonizing methodology expects researchers to make use of particular methods that do not contribute to the harm that western scholars have historically created and perpetuated, the methodology also poses questions that I was able to ask myself throughout my research process. In short, these questions involve the author of a research project critically analyzing their relationship between themselves and their subjects. I elaborate on the relational aspect of feminist research in my methods section below.

In this thesis I also employ feminist ethnography. To define ethnography, scholar and professor of anthropology Brian A. Hoey states this, "The term ethnography has come to be equated with virtually any qualitative research project where the intent is to provide a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice" (Hoey 2012, par. 1). However, *feminist* ethnography reconceptualizes this definition. Davis and Craven define feminist ethnography as follows,

> In essence, feminist ethnography attends to the dynamics of power in social interaction that *starts* from a gender analysis. By gender analysis, we mean that a feminist ethnographic project takes into account all people in a field site/community/organization, and pays particular attention to gender by honing in on peoples' statuses, the different ways in which (multiple) forms of privilege allow them to wield power or benefit from it,

> and the forces and processes that emerge from all of the above (Davis and Craven 2016, 9).

Keeping the above definition in mind, I approached each of my research methods, particularly interviewing, through a feminist ethnographic lens. Throughout this project, I not only examine how the values and daily lives of particular nuns reflect spiritual activist theory, I also do so while considering the ways that race, class, gender, and religion have shaped the privileges and oppressions they have experienced throughout their lives, and therefore shape their role as activists.

Methods

There are three research methods employed throughout this thesis: discourse analysis, case study, and interviewing. Discourse analysis, or the examination of texts, serves as the primary research method. The authors of *The Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* write this on discourse analysis (named here as content analysis), "Sociologists, historians, literary analysts, anthropologists, and archeologists, among others - whether feminist or not - employ content analysis to study cultural materials as something produced by human people. These products stem from every aspect of human life, including relatively private worlds, "high" culture, popular culture, and organizational life" (Reinharz, Kulick 2007). To elaborate, I have collected a range of sources which I closely analyze in my exploration of whether Catholic sisters might be understood as spiritual activists theorized in the frameworks outlined in the introduction. These sources include documentary films, zines, academic articles, popular press articles, and books. In analyzing these sources, I have been attentive to their date of production, and the standpoint of their producers.

Furthermore, I engage in discourse analysis through a feminist lens. In "Reading Between the Lines: Feminist Content Analysis Into the Second Millenium" from *The Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis,* Shulamit Reinharz and Rachel Kulick do not offer one, clean-cut definition of feminist discourse or content analysis, but instead argue that a proper feminist analysis of literature and media must require the researcher to take several factors into account. Some of these factors may include, but are not limited to, the researcher's standpoint view, the author's standpoint view, the dominant culture the researcher lives in, the dominant culture the author produced their piece in, and both the researcher and author's intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, class, ability, sexuality, religion, and gender identity. To be sure I was considering these factors, my process of discourse analysis included multiple readings and/or viewings of each of my sources. I also attempted to examine sources that would offer a holistic picture of the subject I'm exploring within my thesis.

Moreover, discourse analysis, while its own research method, also assisted me in understanding my case studies. Case study was an appropriate and efficient method to use within this research process, as it is the best way to capture collective experiences (e.g., a group of nuns acting as spiritual activists) while also being able to examine how the individual within the collective experience is a unique actor (e.g., highlighting a specific method of spiritual activism utilized by specific Sisters). That being said, it is also important to note where the case study method is limited. For example, while I tried to choose two case studies representing a spectrum of experiences, there are still only two case studies represented here. In other words, while the case studies I have chosen include many diverse and layered experiences, the scope of this study is still limited. Furthermore, case study is a commonly used method within social science research, so the question then becomes how can one employ a feminist case study method? In the

Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis, author and scholar Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber informs readers that feminist research must avoid essentialism at all costs. As previously mentioned, essentialist approaches in research have led to limited, and even oppressive outcomes. In other words, when conducting research through a feminist lens, a responsible feminist researcher would in theory bear witness to understand a collective experience, while also acknowledging the limits of their research. An additional key facet to feminist research is to avoid the collectivization of an entire identity or standpoint view. As an example, I look towards the book *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research*. On focus groups, (and referencing scholar Sue Wilksonson), editors Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Michelle L. Yaiser describe how from an essentialist perspective, often times researchers attempt to view a study of a group as a way to study an individual. Wilksonson also notes that a post-structuralist framework acknowledges how these groups are socially constructed. In other words, The key takeaways from the above mentioned work are that in my research I strive to not single out the individual, nor collectivize an entire group of people. Rather, I instead study how groups of particular Catholic Sisters work together in communities to strive for social justice through a shared love of devotion to Jesus Christ.

Finally, the last method I utilize in this thesis is interviewing. Once again, my approach to interviewing is informed by feminist ethnography, as well as deep listening praxis. I draw upon these strategies and methodologies for a very specific reason. Namely, I echo Marjorie L. Devault's thinking when she names what is central to a feminist interview, that being intentional and active listening. To quote Devault in "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint" from *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research*, "I use the term 'listening' in this section in a broad sense, to refer to what we do while interviewing, but also to the hours we spend later

listening to tapes or studying transcripts, and even more broadly, to the ways we work at interpreting respondents' accounts" (Devault 2004, 101). This echoes a practice described in Miriam Raider-Roth's "Listening Guide", in which she articulates the value behind listening to interviews multiple times in order to more holistically understand what your interviewee is trying to say.

There is also a strong connection between feminist interviewing and the spiritual activist framework. Throughout her many works, Gloria Anzaldúa emphasizes the critical need for deep listening in order to build community and bridge across differences. In a feminist interview, the same method of listening must be utilized. In other words, a feminist interviewer strives for honesty and open-mindedness. While interviews within the broad field of scientific research can end in an interviewer interpreting their interviewees words to match what the interviewer wants or needs to hear for their research, a feminist interview can only occur when an interviewer tries their best to shed preconceived notions of their interview, to shed expectations and productivity goals, and to commit to simply listening.

Locating Myself

In order to properly conduct feminist research, it is important to address the social location from which I write this thesis. I identify as a white, middle class bisexual person. I was socialized as a girl and currently identify as gender-queer, (I use she/her or they/them pronouns). Additionally, much of my socialization as a child occurred within the Catholic church. I attended a Catholic pre-school, attended weekly Sunday school, and was confirmed Catholic at the age of seventeen. Other than my upbringing, I currently hold no relationship with the Catholic church, and do not consider myself a practicing Catholic.

Given that this thesis relies heavily on writings and scholarship produced by women of color, it is important for me to note that for the purposes of this project, while I will be applying their well-researched theories to certain examples of Catholic nuns, I had no hand in forming these theories, nor have I added anything new to their ideologies. Spiritual activist theory, whether it falls under Indigenous feminism, Womanism, or Chicana feminism, very much stems from, and grows out of the epistemologies of women of color.

The idea for this thesis came about after having enrolled in Dr. LeeRay Costa's Spiritual Activism class. In the class we had to complete a final research paper or action project related to spiritual activism. As I was brainstorming ideas for the project, I began to remember the time I spent with a group of cloistered nuns during my confirmation year when I was seventeen years old. Their convent, Christ the Bridegroom in Northeastern Ohio, demonstrated qualities which I now know to be deeply important parts of feminist praxis. They practiced deep listening and radical openness, and lived each day of their lives knowing and understanding how their actions would affect each other and those around them. These nuns, in turn, helped me to decide on my confirmation name, Joan of Arc. Although they had such a huge impact on my life, at the time I couldn't help but think about how these nuns most likely did not share my social justice values. Upon pursuing this topic further, I have come to understand that many consecrated women hold values that align with feminist ideology. As Dr. Mina Roces states in her article, "The Filipino Catholic Nun as Transnational Feminist," the idea of nuns as feminists has been largely ignored or rejected by gender and women's studies scholars. While the purpose of this thesis is not to necessarily label these women as feminists, studying how these women may practice spiritual activism, a body of theory that is informed by and informs feminism, has the potential to influence how feminists view the possible intersections of feminism, spirituality, and religion.

CHAPTER 2

2.1: "Radical Feminist Nuns"

While nuns participating in acts of social justice have been occurring for centuries, there have been certain institutional changes within the Catholic church that broadened the accessibility for Catholic nuns to receive a more holistic education, and to bear witness to experiences outside of their own groups. Two of these institutional changes were the introduction of the Sister Formation Conference and subsequently the Sister Formation Movement, and a few years later the Second Vatican Council, most commonly known as Vatican II.

The Sister Formation Movement was a program that provided Catholic Sisters with an advanced education as well as tools to network and organize. Several scholars, including Alexandra Michaelides in her dissertation "Redefining Sisterhood: The New Nuns, Laywomen, and Catholic Feminist Activism, 1953-1992," argue that the Sister Formation Movement even inspired some to begin working towards the goal of women's ordination into Catholic priesthood. To quote scholar Angelyn Dries in "Living in ambiguity: A paradigm shift experienced by the Sister Formation Movement,"

> They convinced women's congregations not only to work together as one to attain similar educational aims but to collaborate on the fundamental issues and problems of religious life. In the 1950's, "integration" had kept Sisters' influence primarily within the confines of American Catholic circles and the Catholic "system." However, by the mid-1960's, Sisters, whose appropriation of professionalism, personalism, and a Christian humanism which was at the heart of Thomism, had stretched that circle in order to include Anglican Sisters, Sisters in Peru, and "the world (Dries 1993, par. 17).

In the spirit of employing a feminist lens to conduct discourse analysis, it is important to note that Dries is a Sister herself, and is therefore approaching her article with that lens. However, the piece does give a good summary of the movement and its greater effects, as referenced in the second paragraph of this section. Furthermore, Dries also explains how the Sister Formation movement in many ways predicted and preceded the changing climate of the Catholic church that would emerge more clearly during the Second Vatican Council. Additionally, many ideologies born out of the sister formation movement and its annual conference sought to "synthesize nature and faith" (Dries 1993, par. 2). In other words, the Sisters studied how mysticism and science worked together to create their belief system, as opposed to separately. This line of thinking echoes theorizations by both Anzaldúa and other spiritual activist scholars that truth(s) and universal understanding cannot be accessed through only one scholastic pathway, but instead, rely on multiple ideologies and epistemologies. That being said, while the Sister Formation Movement may have aligned with certain aspects of spiritual activist beliefs and practices, it also differed in many ways. The nuns within the Sister Formation Movement were still very much committed to continuing the hierarchical practices upon which the Catholic church relies. In fact, in order to receive the education they did, the Sisters had to convince clergy officials that they would employ their newfound education as a tool to promote and stabilize the hierarchy within the Catholic church.

As previously mentioned, the Sister Formation Movement did in many ways create a pathway for the introduction of the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II in 1962. This moment in Catholic history is not necessarily known as a triumph in regards to gender equality, but it did offer a slight restructuring of Catholic theology. Additionally, the early years of Vatican II introduced a new period of several convents and groups of nuns participating in acts of social

justice. To provide a brief definition, Vatican II was a series of sixteen documents that set out to redefine the nature of the Catholic church, specifically as the church of the poor. One of the most critical additions that came out of Vatican II was that nuns now had permission to, and were even required to leave their convents and go overseas as part of their training. During this period, Cardinals and other members encouraged the religious leaders of Catholic parishes to spend some time living amongst the poor. To reference scholar Michael W. Duggan, the introduction of Vatican II was not only about establishing a relationship between impoverished people and the Catholic institution, but it was also about reconfiguring the church's overall relationship with humankind. In "Conscience, Freedom, and Humanism: New Foundations for Catholic Social Teaching at Vatican II" Duggan explains that prior to Vatican II, the Catholic church was most concerned with divine and holy relationships, or heaven. Vatican II sought to shift this focus towards the inhabitants of the earth. In a theological sense, during this time high Christology was considered the most accurate representation of Jesus Christ. This can also be explained as a belief that Jesus Christ was the divine son of God. To follow a lower Christology would mean to acknowledge Jesus Christs' human emotions, such as empathy, as well as his human relationships. This is relevant as the theology many nun activists were following at the time focused on reflecting Jesus' humanity, in particular the way he treated other human beings. With this, while Vatican II saw the beginning of nuns forming more interpersonal relationships with those outside of the church, and therefore fostering a larger collective participation in social justice, there were nuns doing this work long before it became approved by church leadership.

The term "radical feminist nuns" was popularized by the Vatican in 2012 after concern grew among clergy officials that several nuns in the United States were practicing forms of radical feminism and embracing feminist ideals. An investigation by Vatican officials into the

daily lives of US Sisters began shortly thereafter. This particular incident was how I first came to hear of nuns practicing social justice, but through research I have found that these Catholic Sisters are not the only ones, nor were they the first to do so. While Vatican II had huge implications for Catholic sisters and their practice of social justice, there were sisters making strides in Catholic social reform in the 50s and early 60s before the commencement of Vatican II. One Catholic sister who facilitated deeply important work in regard to religious women's participation in social justice (and specifically civil rights) was Sister Mary Antona Ebo. According to scholar Cornelia F. Sexuaer, Sister Mary was one of the first Black nursing sisters, and very much devoted her life to caring for other human beings and serving her community. While Sister Mary's approach to change within the Catholic church was largely based upon reformative strategies, as the nuns were still living a semi-cloistered lifestyle, the efforts made by her and other nuns in the fight for civil rights (and specifically equal voting rights) were vital. The height of this work came when Sister Mary Antona Ebo and several other religious leaders, including many nuns, attended the Selma March in 1965. These nuns are often referred to as the "Sisters of Selma," and they made headlines and magazine covers all over the United States. Their role as spiritual activists is clear to see, as their methods of peaceful protest and prayer to achieve social justice and racial equality under the law were demonstrated throughout the movement and inspired the actions of other Catholic activists.

A second example of nuns practicing social justice advocacy inspired by the effects of Vatican II comes from a specific set of Catholic Sisters in the Philippines during the 1970s. To reiterate, Vatican II created an expectation of travel and global education of Catholic Sisters, which came in the form of pilgrimages. The nuns' return home from their pilgrimages saw them living amongst the impoverished population of the Philippines, and also happened to coincide

with the introduction of Filipino martial law, a time in which the Filipino wealth gap became even more pronounced (Roces 2012, 38). This combination of events led to the nuns' politicization, and to their rallying for women, the poor, and victims of martial law. The nuns organized several grassroots movements, and even worked together as a community to examine the victimization of women that is often utilized and enforced by the Catholic church. In other words, the nuns recognized how the Catholic church promoted women's suffering, and the suffering of those who had been affected by colonization, as a good thing, necessary for their entrance to Heaven. This was an embedded aspect of Catholic liturgy that the nuns sought to change. These Filipina nuns formed one of the first larger groups of Sisters participating in activism that I believe most aligns with the practice of spiritual activism outlined in this thesis. Furthermore, in *Transforming Feminist Practice*, author Leela Fernandes states, "At another level, movements for social justice that rest on strategies of retribution that are violent either in physical, material or spiritual terms also limit the possibilities of a deeper lasting form of transformation because they ultimately mirror the kinds of structures of oppression they seek to overturn" (Fernandes 2003, 53). The Filipina nuns' practice of sitting with others and their practice of deep listening mirror Fernandes' preferred social justice method of peaceful activism. Many of the concepts Fernandes writes about in *Transforming Feminist Practice* either reference or share commonalities with the three frameworks I utilize for this thesis. As an example, the above quote reflects the Womanist belief that the constructed power that uphold systems of violence will not be able to be overturned with strategies that call upon that same constructed power. As an aside, in section 2.3, I describe an interview I conducted with a Sister at Network. In this interview, the Sister describes liturgy as another form of activism Network prioritizes and

centers within their work. Liturgy as an activist method is another concrete example of peaceful protest that Fernandes describes in *Transforming Feminist Practice*.

The actions of the Sisters of Selma and this group of Filipina nuns working to end poverty carved a pathway for Network: Advocates for Justice, Inspired by Catholic Sisters, the organization at the center of my first case study. As previously mentioned, concern grew among clergy officials that several nuns in the United States were practicing forms of radical feminism and embracing feminist ideals. According to Ruth Braunstein in her essay *Strategic Storytelling by Nuns on the Bus*, the Vatican was concerned that many Sisters within the US were drawing attention to issues of social justice while failing to explicitly advocate against same-sex marriage and pro-choice policies and legislation. In other words, US Bishops wanted these women to follow a strict agenda that more comfortably reflected the goals of both the US Bishops themselves, and the Vatican. A misdirected and falsified wish of being united was, in many ways, a method of control some clergy were hoping to use against the Sisters. Network was an organization that bore the brunt of these attacks. Part of the reason for this was the bus tour Network had launched called Nuns on the Bus which sought to publicly advocate for the passing of the Affordable Care Act, otherwise known as "Obama Care." Due to the highly political nature of this issue, the Sisters received a lot of media coverage which led to the Vatican watching these particular sisters more closely than others.

In the next section, I discuss further the work of the Sisters at Network and compare their policies, actions, and advocacy projects to aspects of spiritual activist theory described in the introduction of this thesis. In doing so I seek to determine how these women's actions and ideologies align with spiritual activism, and how they do not. Specifically, this case study

includes an evaluation of the current work Network is participating in, as well as an interview with a Sister currently working as an activist and collaborator at Network.

2.2: Nuns for Social Justice: The Work Continues

Across the theoretical frameworks I have described in this intro of this thesis, there are common themes across each that I will identify and use to examine the spiritual activist practices of the Sisters. Some of these commonalities that I am referring to include an emphasis on dismantling binaries, building community, bridging across differences, and understanding the body as a site of knowledge. These key aspects of spiritual activism can be achieved through many methods, two in particular being deep listening and spiritual practice. I would also like to note that while there are commonalities in ideology across these theoretical frameworks, each framework is still distinct in how the authors and theorists approach these values. Additionally, each framework relies upon the unique epistemology, life experience, and intersectional experience of its author. For this portion of my study, the sources I examine include articles and press releases I have found on the Network website, as well as other press releases, interviews, and publications on the nonprofit.

In order to properly conduct feminist discourse analysis, it is important to make note of the context in which the sources I examine were written or produced. As more elaborately discussed in my methods section, when conducting discourse analysis through a feminist lens, it is important to take into account the researcher's standpoint view, the author's standpoint view, the dominant culture the researcher lives in, the dominant culture the author produced their piece in, and both the researcher and author's intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, class, ability, sexuality, religion, and gender identity. Therefore, it is important to note I am

approaching my analysis as a white, queer, AFAB[3] person, and it is equally important to note that a majority of the sources I examine were produced by authors who identify as white women. Additionally, many are members of Network themselves, which is helpful in gaining the point of view of a person working for their organization, but also requires readers and myself as the researcher, to be vigilant in pointing out possible biases. Moreover, within the dominant culture we are currently situated in throughout the United States, Catholicism does not necessarily exist as a marginalized or non-marginalized religion. This is an important factor when considering nuns as social justice activists, as these women do have privilege in approaching their activism from the location of a religion that is, for the most part, socially accepted within the United States.

To begin, Network is grounded in what the organization refers to as Catholic Social Teaching. According to the Network website, the Catholic social teaching the Sisters are referring to is rooted in the Catholic reformation era, or Vatican II. To quote,

> In *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World which emerged from the Second Vatican Council, we were called to address global poverty and inequality, saying it is Christians' responsibility to "scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel" (4). This instruction to face the present situation with courage in order to fight and overcome injustices emphasizes the enduring teachings of the Church throughout the ages. More recently, Pope Francis has breathed fresh life into these teachings by challenging the world to convert from a "throwaway culture" to an economy of inclusion (Network 2021, par. 3).

[3] Acronym for 'Assigned Female at Birth'.

This statement is crucial, as it offers a key topic of consideration that is present throughout this entire thesis. That topic is as follows; while it is important to follow Anzaldúa's lead in not ascribing rigid labels and instituting binaries, we must also consider the history of colonialism and white supremacy present in the Catholic institution while discussing the commonalities between spiritual activism and the activist efforts of Catholic Sisters. In this discussion it is important to consider the complex truth that while the Sisters are committed to an institution that perpetuates oppression, they are simultaneously committed to the greater well-being of humanity. In other words, I am attentive to the fact that Catholicism is white supremacist institution, which creates a complicated dynamic and context for activist nuns to truly embody spiritual activism.

Following the written word of Vatican II, some common goals for Network include immigration and economic reform, as well as calling attention to the intersections of the two. A key issue the organization is currently focusing on is placing pressure on the Biden administration to repeal Title 42. In short, Title 42 legalizes the expulsion of people residing in the US who have recently been in a country where a communicable disease was present. In a recent press release, Network stated, "Title 42 is a racist Trump-era rule with no medical basis, inhumanely used to turn away migrants and asylum seekers at the Southern border" (Carroll 2021, par. 2). The Sisters hosted a prayer vigil for this specific issue on December 3rd 2021, in Washington, DC. The organization gathered for a march in front of the White House, which concluded with a rally that featured speakers from the Sisters at Network, representatives from partnered organizations, and a man named Santiago who recently migrated to the United States from Honduras and has been struggling with complications in his and his child's immigration process caused by Title 42. Each person spoke about the racist implications of the Trump-era

rule in front of a large white door decorated with paper hearts, meant to represent the passage in the Gospel of Matthew which references welcoming strangers and providing them with proper resources. Ronnate Asirwatham, the Government Relations Director of Network, as well as Sr. Andrea Koverman, discussed how they envision a future where this title is rescinded, and immigrants are welcomed into the United States with open arms and with proper care and support systems. Each Sister and representative of Network who spoke emphasized their desire for human beings to create "A community of care to each other" (Koverman 2021). Part of this envisioned future includes the Biden Administration ending Migrant Protection Protocols, (otherwise known as 'Remain in Mexico'), and Title 42, but expands even further past these somewhat short term goals. For example, during the event Sisters at Network expressed their interest in striving towards a demilitarized border.

As previously mentioned, Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice also facilitates a lot of social activist work in an attempt to secure economic justice for those residing in the United States. The Sisters at Network have recently published a press release stating their frustration with Senator Joe Manchin and his decision to vote no on President Biden's Build Back Better plan. A statement from Laura Peralta-Schulte, Network Senior Director of Public Policy and Government Affairs, reads "My Catholic faith, which Senator Manchin shares, calls us to 'love one another.' The Catholic Sisters and advocates of Network pray that Senator Manchin will prioritize the well-being of his constituents struggling to put food on their tables over special interests and make good on his promise to pass the transformative Build Back Better Act." (Peralta-Schulte 2021, par. 3). Within this same statement, the Sisters at Network acknowledge the ties between economic equity and racial equity. Peralta-Schulte also stated, "Without immediate action to extend the Child Tax Credit before leaving for the holidays, the Senate risks

throwing nearly 10 million American children below the poverty line, deeper into poverty – and that is sinful" (Peralta-Schulte 2021, par 2). In naming the perpetuation of poverty as a sin, the Sisters of Network show their commitment to following a liberation theology that does not promote or value the suffering of individuals and hierarchy.

While queer liberation has not been named a key issue on Network's agenda, I would be remiss to not call attention to a post on Network's blog about the importance of overturning anti-trans legislation. In an article posted to the blog written by Network member and student of Harvard divinity school, Virginia Schilder quotes Sister Louisa Derouen, writing

> Transgender people are far more attuned than most of us to the reality that we human beings are a complex, mysterious, body-spirit creation of God, and they want nothing more than to honor that reality… They are part of the body of Christ, and they deserve to be treated as the body of Christ (Schilder, Derouen 2021, par 3).

Given how the Catholic church has historically been opposed to queer and trans identity and rights, that the Sisters of Network chose to make a statement on behalf of these communities and recognize the unique knowledge they possess supports the argument that these sisters are able to perform acts of spiritual activism by definition.

Another way in which the Sisters of Network reflect spiritual activist theory is in the practices through which they hope to inspire social change. Based on my research, prayer seems to be integral to each of the initiatives the nuns and their allies participate in. As described in section Intro.3, prayer, as a method of activism has been employed within spiritual activist circles, though it is critically important to note that prayer as utilized in Indigenous feminist and Indigenous activist circles is a distinct form of prayer that is situated in a unique cultural context. Prayer that is practiced in certain Indigenous activist circles very much centers making

connections between all live and non-living beings. A description of the type of prayer utilized in some Indigenous communities can be found in section Intro.3. A more similar form of prayer (though once again, there are key distinctions) would be that which is employed by certain Womanists. In *The Womanist Idea*, and as referenced in section Intro.4, Layli Maparyan tells the story of Immaculée Ilibagiza. Ilibagiza is a spiritual activist who also happens to be a survivor of the 1990s Rwandan genocide. Given that Ilibagiza's spirituality has roots in Catholicism, her story shows a valuable example of prayer as a method of spiritual activism, and demonstrates similarities to the Sisters at Network. Namely, through her story, Ilibagiza used prayer as a vessel to transform anger into forgiveness and love (Maparyan 2011, 183). There is a common thread between these stories, as both women use prayer in an attempt to connect with something greater in order to achieve a form of spiritual enlightenment. In theory, this enlightenment would ideally aid the process of liberation. A key difference is that within much of Womanist thought, prayer is utilized with the hopes of affecting energies, while for the Sisters at Network, prayer is more about connecting with, and following the lead of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, there are similarities between the four values of Womanism as articulated by Layli Maparyan, and the work of the Sisters of Network. As described in Into.5, these four values are; constant self-reflexivity, environmental justice, an understanding of spirituality, and community building. Self-reflexivity is a key piece of the everyday lives of the Sisters at Network. While this is a value of Womanism, an ideology which holds spirit at its' center, spiritual activist theorists across all three frameworks define self-reflexivity in their own unique ways. Evidence of the Network nuns practicing self-reflexivity can be found on one of the Sisters' blogs titled "Spirit Filled Sisters." In one blog post titled, "Running from the past is no way to dismantle racism," Julia Morris discusses the implications of the Catholic church having

been one of the largest slave holders in North America. She goes on to discuss how Network must not attempt to bury the Catholic church's history with racism. For example, Morris discusses the role that the Catholic Church played in the transatlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery. Morris also calls attention to how President Joe Biden, a Catholic, continues to allow for the usage of the racist Title 42 discussed above. To quote Morris, "If the Catholic Church is actually serious when it says that racism is an intrinsic evil, then Catholic educators, politicians, and voters are going to need to start acting like it. So take it from me and the 87% of Americans who want this to be taught in schools -– not teaching about racism helps no one" (Morris 2021, par. 10). While these statements in no way erase the racist and colonialist history (and some ongoing goals) of the Catholic church, Network nuns' ability to be self-reflexive in how they themselves have contributed to systems of systemic racism and white supremacy are key to their ongoing practice of social justice advocacy.

The second value of Womanism, environmental justice, also holds a place at Network. While environmental justice has yet to be a key goal of the organization, the Sisters do recognize that the continued collapse of our environment is an issue that needs serious and immediate attention. The first ever newsletter released by Network included the environment as an issue of interest in regards to lobbying, and on the Network website, you can read the profile of several Sisters who express an interest in environmental advocacy. In regards to the third listed value of womanism, an understanding of spirituality, this is of course central to the work of these nuns and their allies. The Sisters at Network see their spirituality as interwoven with interconnectedness between all people. In a recent statement about the upcoming meeting of President Biden and Pope Francis, Sister Mary J. Novak, head of Network, stated "This ability to see interconnection is constitutive to the spirituality of the Catholic sisters whose legacy lives on

in the U.S. Church and at Network in particular where it is my honor to continue that legacy" (Novak 2021, par. 2).

Given this, the most notable overlap of Network and spiritual activist theory can be seen through the Womanist value of connecting with others and building community. Perhaps most notably, during the rally and their continuing efforts to expand immigration reform in the United States, the Sisters expressed their vision to follow the words of Pope Francis and transform borders into places of encounter, which in turn are places where true community can be built and fostered. This ideology in many ways reflects Gloria Anzaldúa's border theory. While dismantling physical borders is a key goal within spiritual activism, Anzaldúa also notes how border identity can explain how race, social class, and gender work together to inform one's worldview. Specifically, Anzaldúa focuses on those living between borders, or in liminal zones. I believe that both notions of creating a community of care, and transforming borders into places of encounter not only reflect the ideology of dismantling physical borders, but in many ways take into account the identity aspect that Anzaldúa described throughout her many works. Based upon my study of this organization, I argue that the Sisters at Network understand the importance of not homogenizing identity, but uplifting it. This can be seen through the organizations focus on centering the voices of those who have experienced immigration, and building community with those who have this unique life experience. Furthermore, this ideology demonstrated by Network reflects Anzaldúa's theory of bridging across difference. As Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating articulated, interconnectedness is at the heart of spiritual activism, and central to interconnectedness is being able to bridge across difference. Gloria Anzaldúa states, "The bridge (boundary between the world you've just left and the one ahead) is both a barrier and a point of transformation" (Anzaldúa 2015, 137). Aided by Conocimiento, a concept explored in both

Intro.1 and Intro.5, bridges are utilized within our self-transformation, but they are also utilized in our connections and relationships with others. In other words, if recognizing our interconnectedness is a goal of spiritual activism, and bridging across difference is one route to achieve this goal, then one method we can use to form these bridges is through bearing witness to the experiences of others, an ideology foundational in both spiritual activist theory and feminist theory, and articulated by scholars such as Anzaldúa, Keating, and bell hooks.

Additionally, in the documentary *Radical Grace* directed by Rebecca Parish, the film revealed that interconnectedness is also at the heart of each of the featured Sisters' commitment to social activism. In the documentary, Sr. Simone Campbell states, "The role of Catholic teaching is to counter [that] individualism with a keen knowledge of solidarity" adding, "We are only fully human when we are connected to one another" (Campbell, Parish 2015). Each of the Sisters presented in this film voiced their dissatisfaction with the individualistic approach that the Catholic church has been leaning towards especially within the past few decades, an approach that also mirrors that of United States capitalism. I also draw a connection between the practice of moving away from individualism to community-based activism and the scholarship critiquing neoliberalism that was originally theorized by Indigenous people, scholars, and feminists. That the Sisters of Network view physical borders, or La Frontera, as places of encounter reflects what these scholars have to say about bearing witness. One way we can the Sisters at Network demonstrate the act of bearing witness is through what Network is most known for, that being Nuns on the Bus. Nuns on the Bus, an initiative of Network, is another place where these women's commitment to community building is in evidence. Nearly each year since 2012, the nuns of Network have commenced a bus tour across the country, stopping in several US cities to speak with people about the issues that most impact them. Some themes of their past few bus

tours have included economic justice, Medicaid expansion, immigration reform, voting rights, and tax justice. The Sisters strive to speak with residents of every city they visit, in which they share conversations, prayer, and sometimes even lemonade. Rather than forming assumptions on what residents of the United States need in regards to social justice initiatives, the nuns actually go out and speak with, and listen to the experiences of others, as well as provide a platform for those who are most affected by the issues.

There are also smaller, yet still impactful means the Sisters participate in that aid the spiritual activist mission of bearing witness and bridging across differences. For example, in an interview, Sister Simone Campbell, founder of Network, spoke about how the Sisters purposely choose to dress in everyday clothes. Sr. Simone stated that by dressing as any other person, the Sisters believe they are effectively erasing one representation of possible hierarchy they might hold over the average person. This actually ties back to the story of Sister Mary Antona Ebo, who in later years decided to participate in activist work without her habit, in order to remove a false sense of moral superiority. Additionally, I found that the Sisters often partner with other secular nonprofits, and organizations representing various religions in order to expand the reach of their platform and to understand issues through multiple lenses.

To reiterate, I have come to the conclusion that across each of the theoretical frameworks discussed within the introduction of this thesis, there are four shared commonalities that are considered to be important aspects of spiritual activism. Those commonalities are, dismantling binaries, building community, bridging across difference, and understanding the body as a site of knowledge. While I will further elaborate on these connections in my conclusion, I argue that the Sisters of Network do show evidence of three of these four key themes. In regards to dismantling binaries, the Sisters of Network strive to be interconnected to all of humanity, which in turn

requires the dismantling of binaries created by systems such as capitalism and white supremacy. Many of the values that Sisters and representatives of Network discuss reflect Gloria Anzaldúa's Nos/Otras ideology, or the belief that we are both us and them at once, which is in direct opposition to an us vs. them mentality. In other words, contrary to historical understandings of Catholic nuns, the Sisters do not see themselves as being separate from society. Instead, these Sisters view themselves as active participants in their communities, and view the systems of oppression that harm others as systems that equally harm both themselves and all beings. This journey towards interconnectedness also fuels the Sisters' passion for community building, and bridging across differences. To both restate and conclude, this ecosystem of activism is very much built upon the methods of bearing witness to the experiences of others, and prayer.

2.3: An Interview with a Sister of Network

I was lucky enough to have the chance to interview a member of Network's team for this research project. During our discussion, we covered a broad range of topics including her perspective on the intersections of (Sister)hood and spiritual activism. A full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A. As discussed in my methods section, I sought to conduct my interview through a feminist lens while following all human subjects protocols to be sure the interview was completed both ethically, and comfortably for my interviewee.[4]

However, given the restrictions of the human subjects review committee, I am unable to include a full transcript of the interview, as no electronic recording devices were permitted. Additionally, to protect my interviewee's anonymity, I will be referring to her as a pseudonym

[4] This research project was approved by the Hollins Human Research Review Committee (HRRC) on February 15th, 2022.

throughout this sections, Sister Jane. For a review of what constitutes a feminist ethnographic interview, see my discussion in chapter one.

At the beginning of our interview, I explained how scholar Gloria Anzaldúa describes her theoretical framework of spiritual activism as a practice that requires self-reflection in order to achieve both self-transformation, and eventually, social transformation. I also shared that Anzaldúa, among other feminist scholars, give examples such as meditation, walking meditation, and fasting to help begin and sustain this process. I then asked Sister Jane how she practices self-reflection, and how has her faith has guided her through this process. At first, Jane described the practices she participates in on an individual level. Some of these practices have included journaling, meditative walks, and prayer. Jane stated that she tries to journal most mornings, and she generally does so in silence. Moreover, the Sister stated that walking helps her stay connected to the area she lives in. A connection to one's community and the land in which one resides are both embedded aspects of spiritual activist theory.

The Sister also described how she practices spiritual activist techniques more communally. She discussed how she and her team constantly strive to ground themselves in the voices of others, as opposed to their own voices. In order to hold themselves accountable to this task, Sister Jane explained that their team has a weekly debrief, and also consistently meets with other activist partners that exist in different social locations. One of the organizations she mentioned working with was a black-led nonprofit titled Freedom Block, which I mention again below. She thanked her religious community for always holding her accountable to her words and actions on a personal level. This mutual accountability manifests in the sisters coming together in liturgy both to raise their own spirits and to uplift the diverse voices in their

communities. Liturgy is one practice of activism the Sisters at Network have often used in order to strive towards social justice.

I asked Jane whether she participated in any personal rituals or practices in order to be able to continuously seek social justice, and if so, what those were. My purpose in asking this question was to create space for discussing how difficult it can be to sustain activist work both physically and emotionally. In response to this query my interviewee explained how spiritual direction is important in this work, and explained that the current director of her department has been great at understanding how draining the work they do can be. In her answer the Sister focused on how important humor can be in activist work, and how helpful it has been during her time at Network. While Jane recognizes the serious and critical nature of her work, she explained that she tries not to get bogged down by what individual politicians working against the values of Network such as Mitch McConnell say. The Sister also pointed out that it can be refreshing to simply surround yourself with a community that shares your point of view. While bridging across difference is a crucial part of Networks' activism as well as spiritual activism more broadly, the Sister also recognized that having a community that can both serve as a "home base" and also align with your value system is important in sustaining emotionally and physically laborious work such as this.

I then transitioned to asking Sister Jane more directly about her practice of bearing witness. I started by referencing the 1987 book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa. In this book, Anzaldúa explains the importance of "bearing witness" to the suffering and oppression of others in order to aim for understanding and interconnectedness. She goes on to describe how interconnectedness is the only true path towards ending systems of domination such as patriarchy and white supremacy. I then asked my

interviewee how she has been able to "bear witness" through her time with Network, and how this may have impacted her understanding of social activism. The Sister provided a rich answer, first describing her work on the grassroots mobilization team. She stated that in her and her teams' work, they are constantly striving to work with, and learn from people who are different from themselves. For the Sisters at Network, this means talking with people who hold different identity experiences than them, and come from different social locations. Valuing the knowledge of people whose life stories are different than your own aligns with spiritual activist theory in a multitude of ways. For example, there is a commonality between honoring the knowledge that is embedded and produced in a life story, and the storytelling methodology as created by Métis women that was described in section Intro.2.

Furthermore, the Sisters, including my interviewee, approach their work with a number of strategies and values in mind. For example, they go into their work knowing that in order to authentically and appropriately help people, they must let go of some of their own power. In the words of Jane, Network wants to be sure they are authentically partnering with the organizations they work with. This also looks like the Sisters at Network ensuring that they are not centering the voices of white nuns or white voices more generally, but rather, the voices of marginalized groups. Moreover, the nuns strive to partner with the people and the organizations they represent, and to be in relationship and constant conversation with them. This, in the words of the Sister, makes for more effective advocacy. She also mentioned her recent meeting with representatives from the Black-led organizing collaborative Freedom Block, whose main mission was listening to the people. In talking about this conversation she stated that it is important to remember that activism is not what she, or those at Network *think* needs to be done, but what the people *say* needs to be done. This particular way of thinking is notable for many reasons; in particular, it

connects to the womanist value of validating knowledge through community consensus. In other words, this strategy lets communities take the lead on activist efforts aimed at benefitting their own communities.

Given that community is critical to spiritual activism, as well as to the theoretical frameworks that inform this thesis, I asked Jane about ways that she herself has found community within Network, either with her fellow activists, or with the people she has met through her work. The Sister joyfully answered that she loves the people she works with. She mentioned that she had joined the staff during a period of the COVID-19 pandemic in which they all worked online, and that she didn't actually get to meet her fellow activists and coworkers until this past December (2021). However Jane noted that she was able to build a strong community with the other staff members over the video-conferencing platforms Zoom and Teams. Part of this community was cemented by the fact that the staff at Network was all navigating big changes together. She stated that this community represents Catholicism for the Sisters at Network and those who have been helped by Network. During COVID, a new way of being there for one another and their communities arose. The Sister stated, “Covid created a widening even when we are all so enclosed.”

At the close of our interview I asked Sister Jane to describe Network’s 2022 goals, and how she and her team planned to use social activism to achieve them. The Sister stated that Network’s key focus in 2022 is racial justice. This also includes using a racial justice lens in every single one of the platforms and issues they address. This means recognizing how systemic racism has impacted both US politics and Network as an organization. In regards to how Network is going about this, she explained they have been closely analyzing and changing their advocacy strategy, examining who they are listening to, as well as what groups are properly

being represented in legislative positions. To highlight one issue specifically, Jane stated that in regards to their immigration platform, they want to be sure they are uplifting the voices of those immigrating to the United States from Haiti, as that is a specific group that has not received as much media attention as immigrants from other nations. Network is also continuing their work of providing equitable housing to all who reside in the US, as well as reparations to communities that have suffered racial oppression and white supremacy.

Jane mentioned that voting rights continues to have a large platform at Network. Network has continued to call on Sisters in their communities to advocate for voting rights. The interviewee stated that this work in particular has been fought for by nuns for over sixty years. This is a reference to the Sisters of Selma and other nuns who have historically been on the front lines of voting rights activism as mentioned in section 2.1. The Sister mentioned that Network is closely examining how the Sisters should approach this work in an even more divisive era. They begin, says the Sister, by asking how we are in conversation with folks about that divisiveness.

After describing her work and the work of her colleagues, Sister Jane did in fact refer to herself as a "spiritual activist," which is important to consider given the question explored in this thesis. Additionally, the practices, values, and ideologies represented in this interview closely align with the spiritual activist frameworks upon which my analysis relies. There are at least three examples of this that I have mentioned in my discussion of this interview. Those examples include; Sister Jane's commitment to self-reflexivity, her valuing of knowledge that arises from storytelling, and her commitment to validating knowledge through community consensus.

CHAPTER 3

3.1: Nuns Dismantling Human Trafficking

The second case study I consider is an organization called Talitha Kum, a Catholic Sister-led nonprofit that has been operating since 1998, and formally began in 2009. Talitha Kum operates as a network of consecrated women, as opposed to only one organization. As of January 2022, the nuns have locations in ninety-two countries across Africa, Asia, the Americas, Oceania, and Europe. The main mission of the organization is to end human trafficking. Their methods involve the prevention of human trafficking, along with protection, social reintegration and rehabilitation of human trafficking survivors. Similar to my examination of Network above, my discourse analysis of Talitha Kum relies upon sources directly produced by the organization. It should be acknowledged that while these materials can allow us to gain a unique perspective from the nuns who are currently working with Talitha Kum, there is also a possibility of bias. Additionally, unlike Network, Talitha Kum is a global organization, meaning the sources used for this study come from Sisters working in vastly different social and cultural contexts.

The history portion of the Talitha Kum website makes note of how Catholic nuns have been working to end trafficking and slavery for centuries. While there have been nuns participating in acts of social justice for some time, including efforts to free others from bondage, ending human trafficking is a relatively new focus for the Catholic church as a whole. Research into the history of the Catholic church has shown that the Catholic church, as an institution, had a large in role in both owning enslaved people and justifying the institution of slavery. According to Matheus Elias da Silva's essay "Bondage and Freedom: The Role of the Catholic Church Regarding African Slavery in Brazil during the Emancipation Period from 1850 to 1888," many

scholars have suggested that the Catholic church as a religious institution did not view slavery as a true moral wrong until the introduction of Vatican II in 1965. Furthermore, several Jesuit priests were slaveholders themselves.

Notably Pope Francis, elected to the papacy in 2013, made the eradication of slavery and human trafficking one of his key missions. This decision to do so emerged from the ideology that many Catholic social justice activists follow, including Talitha Kum, in interpreting the Bible to value the oppressed over the oppressor. This ideology is referenced in a thesis titled “Faith, Freedom and Fighting Human Trafficking” by Gigi Ortiz and sponsored by Dr. John Tures. Furthermore, in 2014 a meeting was held at the Vatican on the state of human trafficking. Several world religious leaders including the Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi al-Modarresi, (representing Shia Islam), Mata Amritanandamyi (representing Hinduism), and the venerable Bhikkuni Thich Nu Chan Khong (representing Buddhism) joined forces in discussion and community as they formed the Global Freedom Network. The network’s purpose was to unite global religious leaders and followers of religion in centering human trafficking as a critical issue, and dismantling the institution of human trafficking. This work set the stage for the work of Talitha Kum. The Vatican’s focus on ending human trafficking has allowed the nuns at Talitha Kum to work in an environment that supports their work. This differs slightly from the unsupportive environment that the sisters at Network have often found themselves in.

The name “Talitha Kum” originates from the Gospel of Mark. Within the gospel, there is a story in which Jesus brings a young girl back to life. To quote the Talitha Kum website, the direct translation of the words “talitha kum” into English reads, “young girl, I say to you, arise” (Talitha Kum, “Vision” 2022, par. 1). In choosing this phrase to represent their work, the Sisters at Talitha Kum say this, “The expression "Talitha Kum" has the transformative power of

compassion and mercy, which awakens the deep desire for dignity and life which may be asleep and injured by the many forms of exploitation" (Talitha Kum "Vision" 2022, par. 3). One notable aspect about the origins of Talitha Kum is that the Network of Sisters started as a smaller group of concerned Sisters who asked to work on efforts to dismantle human trafficking at the 1998 International Union of Superiors General. Sister Leah Ackerman was responsible for forming the initial study group that eventually evolved into a Toolkit titled "Trafficking of women, girls and children - Information and material for work," and subsequently became Talitha Kum. The organization's website also notes that Sister. Bernadette Sagma and Sister Eugenia Bonetti played significant roles in expanding Talitha Kum around the globe.

While Talitha Kum was started by Catholic Sisters and is, for the most part, run by Catholic Sisters, it is not only Catholic women who lead and participate in Talitha Kum's anti-trafficking efforts. For example, Talitha Kum's network located in the Middle East is referred to as "Wells of Hope." Wells of Hope is co-led by Muslim, Catholic, and Christian women who share the Sisters of Talitha Kum's passion for putting an end to human trafficking, and rehabilitating survivors. A documentary following the efforts of this particular branch of the Network titled *Wells of Hope* was released in 2020, selected for participation in multiple film festivals, and received many awards including best documentary at the Rio Independent Film Festival.

Integral to Talitha Kum's mission is their commitment to being an "on-the-ground organization." While I will discuss the work of the Sisters in more detail in section 3.2, I want to note here that Talitha Kum strives to be out and about speaking one on one with those who are vulnerable to trafficking, those who are currently trapped within the system of trafficking, and those who have survived trafficking. A concrete example of this action is described in a 2021

NBC article titled, “A hidden army of 'very brave' nuns fight child trafficking” and follows the story of Sister Rose Paite, a nun who serves Talitha Kum in Guwahati, India. The article discussed Sister Rose’s mission to save children from being trafficked, and notes that Sister Rose is one of over 60,000 sisters who make up the global network. Like many nuns engaged in this work, Sister Rose walks down the streets of large cities handing Talitha Kum’s cards to women who may be in danger of trafficking.

A noticeable connection to spiritual activism present within Talitha Kum is their commitment to centering the stories of survivors of human trafficking. Much like the Sisters at Network, these Sisters aim to bear witness to the experiences of the most marginalized. To quote directly from a recent press conference, Sister Yolanda Kaftka stated this during Talitha Kum’s call to action to end violence against women: “today we bear witness to the fruits of the activity of listening to the victim and to the sisters’ commitment to their protection as consecrated women working in the church and in society” (Kaftka 2021). In the next section I explore some of the ways the Sisters at Talitha Kum follow through on their commitment to building bridges and bearing witness, and how these commitments connect to spiritual activism. In particular, I look once again towards spiritual activist definitions of prayer, as well as several concepts developed by Gloria Anzaldúa including El Mundo Zurdo.

3.2: A Common Goal: Employing Global (Sister)hood

One motto that the Sisters of Talitha Kum often quote comes from an Ethiopian proverb which reads, “When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.” This quote serves as a perfect example of how Talitha Kum continues to unite across global borders to dismantle the system of human trafficking. In this section I describe some of the more recent activist efforts engaged in by the Sisters who make up Talitha Kum including marching, prayer, organizing, and art.

Additionally, it should be noted that the majority of information in this section regarding the activist work of Talitha Kum is drawn from popular press articles, press releases, websites, and speeches given by Sisters who represent Talitha Kum.

As of today, Talitha Kum has been able to enlist the help of over two thousand nuns, with ongoing training programs expanding their network of Sisters even wider. One of the most well-known actions that these women partake in is a yearly march on the World Day of Prayer, Reflection, and Action Against Human Trafficking. In February of 2020 the march took place in St. Peter's Square, right outside of the Vatican. Each year, the World Day of Prayer, Reflection, and Action Against Human Trafficking is held on the feast of St. Josephine Bakhita. St. Josephine was a Sudanese nun who in many ways has become a symbol for both Talitha Kum, and the Catholic church's mission to end human trafficking. According to journalist Elizabeth Povoledo in the article, "In fight to stop human trafficking, nuns take to the streets," during this event the Sisters at Talitha Kum and members of partner organizations march side by side with those who have survived trafficking and are able to safely participate in a public march. Marching is a significant tactic for several reasons. One of those reasons is that these women are publicly committing themselves to a cause which ultimately seeks to dismantle neoliberal capitalism. Marching also mirrors methods of peaceful protest that have been utilized by spiritual activists for decades. As an example, marching was a tactic used by the Sisters of Selma as described in section 2.1.

In addition to marching, another form of activism performed by these nuns comes in the form of prayer. The Talitha Kum website provides short video clips of Catholic nuns from different global regions explaining how they participate in prayer. Furthermore, on the World Day of Prayer, Reflection, and Action Against Human Trafficking 2021, Talitha Kum held a

Livestream in which nuns from different regions of the globe sent in videos of their groups of Sisters participating in prayers against human trafficking specific to their own cultural and social contexts. Some of the countries that participated included Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Italy, Thailand, Colombia, Nigeria, and the Philippines. Based on my research I have concluded that community is integral to Talitha Kum, and prayer is one way the Sisters can be in community with one another even when a global pandemic keeps them physically separated. As an example, a group of Sisters representing Talitha Kum from Zimbabwe stated this during their contribution of prayer to World Day of Prayer, Reflection, and Action Against Human Trafficking, "Dear Lord, be with all of the victims of human trafficking in Zimbabwe, Africa, and in the whole world. Dear Lord, be with them in their misery, protect them, bless them, and comfort them. We ask this through Christ, our Lord" (Talitha Kum Zimbabwe, 2021). The prayer concluded with the Sisters singing a hymn together in Shona, a native language of Zimbabwe. Within this particular initiative, Sisters representing Talitha Kum asked their supporters to submit their videos of prayer using the hashtag #PrayAgainstTrafficking.

Prayer is integral to Talitha Kum and, as I have previously mentioned, prayer is also often utilized in spiritual activism, though prayer may look like many different things to different people. In *The Spiritual Activist*, Claudia Horwitz describes a spiritual practice as having three main characteristics: 1) it connects us to the presence of the sacred or that which has great meaning in our lives, 2) it is something we do regularly (ideally daily) and without interruption, and 3) it grounds us in the present moment, bringing us into awareness of what is happening right now. The nuns use of prayer echoes these three aspects of a spiritual practice. Though scholars within Indigenous feminist thought and womanism may see prayer through a different lens and describe prayer as a practice based on the transferring of vibrations, there are still

similarities. For example, spiritual activists who ascribe to indigenous feminism(s) and/or Womanism see prayer as a practice that connects us to what, in their belief system, is considered sacred, and all frameworks understand prayer as a tool that can keep us grounded in the present. More distinct definitions of prayer in both Indigenous feminism(s) and Womanism can be found in sections Intro.3 and Intro.4. Ultimately, these characteristics as listed by Claudia Horwitz are what classify the nuns use of prayer as a spiritual practice, and connect the type of prayer utilized by Talitha Kum to spiritual activist theory, Indigenous feminism(s), and Womanism.

In addition to prayer, Talitha Kum Sisters engage in other forms of activism. For example, as referenced in section 3, Sisters in some countries will walk busy streets and subway stations handing out the phone number of their organization to people who they believe may need support (where doing so is appropriate). Their organization, as well as organizations that Talitha Kum has partnered with, are able to provide shelter, support, rehabilitation, and other resources to those who have been impacted by trafficking. While written documentation of the nuns' activist efforts is hard to find as their work often involves sensitive information, I was able to locate information on the nuns' Patreon site. The nuns used Patreon to support an art project titled "Super Nuns" to honor those involved in Talitha Kum's mission. The nuns state that Super Nuns or #SuperNuns became a way to tell their stories through art. The project serves not only as a way to pay tribute to the work of Talitha Kum, but also as a way to raise funds and awareness for the Sisters' activist efforts. Impressively, the nuns' very first patron donor was Pope Francis himself.

These examples reveals the ways that spiritual activist theory aligns with these Sisters' values, even more so than their actions. Based on the theoretical frameworks I use to describe spiritual activism, there are specific aspects of each of these theories that I can see emerging

through the work of these women. In particular, I argue that the work of Talitha Kum reveals aspects of Gloria Anzaldúa's theories of La Facultad, and El Mundo Zurdo. Additionally, I see similarities between Talitha Kum's activism Indigenous feminist theory. Specifically, there is a connection between Talitha Kum, and how indigenous scholars define activism as a set of actions needing to explicitly operate outside of a neoliberal society. Finally, Talitha Kum's efforts to demonstrate understanding coincides with a Womanist commitment to radical interrelatedness. Similar to the nuns of Network, the nuns of Talitha Kum often communicate that it is their mission to center the voices of survivors within their activist work. In a recent speech given by Sister Yolanda Kafka, she states, "At the very basis of our project, we always have had direct contact with victims" (Kafka 2021). In addition to this, the nuns state human trafficking serves as a greater threat to those that are the most marginalized. In several public statements the nuns assert that those who live at the intersection of racial oppression, poverty, and gender oppression are more likely to find themselves trapped within the system of human trafficking, rather than those who live with more privileged identities. This value system that Talitha Kum holds in many ways reflects what Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating have written in their theorizations of El Mundo Zurdo (or The Left Hand World) and La Facultad.

As described in section Intro.1, El Mundo Zurdo is a concept that describes the ability of different marginalized communities to share ideas and concerns in order to dismantle systems of oppression. El Mundo Zurdo relies on the processes of embracing liminality, sharing knowledge, and bridging across difference, therefore aiding the goals of spiritual activism by centering embracing difference, and valuing commonalities. El Mundo Zurdo describes those living with marginalized identities who use their lived experiences to produce and access knowledge that

can liberate themselves, with the understanding that this will eventually contribute to the goal of liberating all. Furthermore, El Mundo Zurdo asserts that those who live in The Left Hand World hold a particular knowledge set that those who do not reside in the Left Hand World will never fully be able to grasp. This type of knowledge is what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as La Facultad. Given the words I have observed from the leaders of Talitha Kum, I believe that Talitha Kum as an organized network understands the importance of centering those with marginalized voices, and those with inherent knowledges and epistemologies they do not share, even if they may not use the exact language that Anzaldúa and Keating do. I discussed one example of this ideology in 3.1, a speech delivered by Sister Yolanda Kafta on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Kafta describes the values of Talitha Kum" "Today we bear witness to the fruits of the activity of listening to the victims and the sisters' commitment to their protection as consecrated women working in the church and society. They were able to create and build bridges involving other people in their commitment" (Kafka 2021). Following Sister Yolanda's speech, Sister Gabriella Bottani, International Coordinator of Talitha Kum, went on to add "We listened to and participated in the traumas of so many people, and people whose traumas were so huge, they were not able to ask for help" (Bottani 2021). The nuns choice to not only center the voices of those who seek to help, but also to, in their words, "participate" in their traumas, shows they value sharing knowledge. Importantly, this practice also shows that Talitha Kum values La Facultad, or the inherent knowledge one gains from living in the margins of society.

In regards to how the actions and thought processes of Talitha Kum evidence Indigenous activist and Indigenous feminist thought, I look upon a prayer and action packet the Talitha Kum Team published on December 10th, 2020. The packet is titled "Talitha Kum Study, Prayer and

Action Packet: Neoliberalism and Human Trafficking in a time of Covid." Neoliberalism or a Neoliberal system describes an economy and greater culture that prioritizes the individual as opposed to larger communities. Neoliberalism also relies on interlocking systems of oppression such as white supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy in order to operate. As an example, many people refer to President Bill Clintons' "welfare reform" as an example of neoliberalism. This was a period that saw a decrease in social welfare programs, accompanied by an increase of criminalization and surveillance towards impoverished people (Peck & Tickell 2002). In a statement regarding the packet, representatives and Sisters of Talitha Kum discuss a second priority they hope to center within their work: dismantling the neoliberal and capitalist system that supports human trafficking. More specifically, Talitha Kum states,

> We denounce this unjust economic model that prioritizes profit over human rights, creates a culture of violence and commodification, and decreases funding for necessary social services, putting people at greater risk of being trafficked. This also affects programs of prevention, protection, support, integration, and reintegration of trafficked people. We denounce the widespread corruption that allows this evil to continue (Talitha Kum International Coordination Commitee 2020, par. 3).

Talitha Kum goes on to state,

> We call on the Church to continue to use Catholic Social Teaching to critique social structures and promote economic and social justice. We call on governments to adopt just alternatives to the neo-liberal model of development; implement anti-trafficking laws, and allocate more funding for the support of long-term programs to prevent human trafficking and assist survivors in their process of healing to re/integrate into society. These programs should be created with input directly from survivors and those who work

> with survivors such as Talitha Kum networks (Talitha Kum International Coordination Committee 2020 par 4.).

Talitha Kum efforts to dismantle both human trafficking and the capitalist system in many ways reflects values that are central to Indigenous feminist thought and Indigenous spiritual activism.

This push to prioritize the needs of communities and the world as a global community also very much reflects Layli Maparyan's womanist theory of radical interrelatedness. To reiterate, radical interrelatedness is the understanding that every action we perform not only affects us but also those around us and our communities. Namely, I see radical interrelatedness being demonstrated in how Talitha Kum talks about the goals of their work. While it is true that Talitha Kum ultimately hopes to see human trafficking end, they also see the end of human trafficking as a benefit not only for current, past, and future survivors but also for the soul of humanity overall. To once again quote Sister Gabriella Bottani directly, "Violence against women hurts the dignity of human beings" (Bottani 2021). According to Maparyan, radical interrelatedness requires mutual dignity and respect for each other and all living beings. Additionally, within Womanism it is understood that all knowledge must be community-based. This is key, as validating knowledge through community agreement aids the spiritual activist value of centering community over the individual, and is in that way, anti-colonial. The Sisters supporting the dismantling of a neo-liberal economy that supports the buying and selling of human beings demonstrates that these Sisters value the same dignity and respect that Dr. Maparyan writes about. Moreover, the survivor-centered activist network created by Talitha Kum demonstrates that these Sisters understand the importance of community-based organizing that is built through community-based knowledge.

CHAPTER 4

4.1: Nuns and Spiritual Activism

As I've described, both Network and Talitha Kum are activist networks that strive towards social justice and liberation. Additionally, there are multiple connections between the forms of activism these women participate in, and spiritual activism as theorized within Indigenous feminism(s), Womanism, and the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating. While there may be connections between the acts of these women and spiritual activism, there are also many nuances that need to be considered when drawing such connections. For example, some questions to consider include: what are the implications of working towards social justice while completing this important work under the authority of a religious institution? Additionally, and particularly looking towards Network, does their work mean something different when these women are, in many ways, participating in social justice activism in direct defiance of the Vatican?

The exploration of these questions requires care and understanding. To repeat a statement I made in section 1.1, throughout my research, I have sought to understand whether there is a liminal space where these women can be both committed to Catholicism, *and* work towards communal liberation. To elaborate further, what does it mean that these women are devout and practicing Catholics (especially in the case of Network) while not following the more conservative doctrine of the church? Does the fact that these organizations vocally oppose the racist, colonialist, homophobic, and misogynistic views of the Catholic church mean anything when these nuns are still devoted to a religion that has historically perpetuated (and continues to perpetuate) these systems of oppression?

To begin to answer these questions, it's important to acknowledge that spiritual activism as a form of activism is not completely unattainable, nor does it exist in a vacuum. Spiritual activism has and does operate within an existing culture that is informed by systems of power. What is key here, however, is that the practice of spiritual activism seeks to undo binaries and aim for a post-oppositional world. In other words, spiritual activism, in many ways similar to abolition theory, aims to dismantle the current system we have, one which relies on the afore-mentioned forces of oppression. Spiritual activists also move past the process of dismantling, and go on to both imagine and endeavor to create a new world that centers community care, understands the body as a site of knowledge, and acknowledges the relevance of intersectionality - including our liminal zones - in bridging across difference. Furthermore, central to spiritual activism is acknowledging that there are multiple truths in the world and that all of these truths should be equally respected. What we consider to be truth often arises from our own social location, therefore, it is difficult to find any truth that can be considered completely objective. In *Light in the Dark*/Luz en lo Oscuro, Gloria Anzaldúa states, "The dominant Western worldview holds that an objective" external reality exists independently of the knower, a reality that science can accurately describe" (Anzaldúa/Keating 2015, 43).

To investigate this concept of multiple truths further, I look again at the example of Talitha Kum's International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking. To provide a quick background on this event, there were two key aspects to Talitha Kum's activist action; prayer, and being in community with one another. Prayer, as outlined by both Layli Maparyan and Claudia Horwitz in *The Spiritual Activist* is a common activist practice in spiritual activist circles. That being said, it should be noted that generally Christian prayer is not what is referred to in spiritual activism, though it is referenced within Womanism. Nonetheless, while in

this instance prayer may be ascribed to a particular religion (in this case, Catholicism), for the purpose of the questions I am investigating, I believe it is potentially more important to understand the *intent* of the prayer, as well as what the practice of prayer represents in this specific event.

As discussed in section 3.2, Talitha Kum did not only call upon their own Sisters and partnered organizations to contribute to this project, but rather they called upon all of humanity to participate, and, if they chose to, submit their videos, artwork, and words of solidarity under the hashtag #PrayAgainstTrafficking. The intent behind the creation of this global community of prayer was not to convert any participants to Catholicism per se (being Catholic was not a requirement to participate), but instead to create a network of global energy focused on one particular goal: ending human trafficking. Additionally, the organization asked participants to center survivors in their hearts. This resonates with the elements of prayer that involve afflicting and connecting energies between beings, as discussed by Mayparyan in Intro.4, and Largo-Anderson in Intro.3

On the topic of creating a post-oppositional world and deconstructing binaries, it is worth noting that partnering with organizations that seek to end human trafficking and slavery in all forms is a key aspect of their organization's work, regardless of the religious makeup of the organizations in question. To quote a representative of Talitha Kum,

> The activities and projects of Talitha Kum are aimed at all those who are robbed of their dignity and deprived of liberty, regardless of their lifestyle, race, religion, economic or sexual orientation. The members of Talitha Kum living and bearing witness to Christian values, dialogue with and show respect for members of the different religious traditions and for non-believers (Talitha Kum 2022).

In other words, Talitha Kum's mission is to bear witness to the stories of human trafficking survivors and eventually dismantle the system of human trafficking. While the Sisters show an undeniable commitment to Catholicism, their ultimate goal (in their words) is not to venerate Catholicism above any other religion or belief system. This could, in theory, point to the possibility that Talitha Kum's values do align with the values of spiritual activism, given that it is not necessarily their stated goal, vision, or mission to seek an expansion of Catholic practitioners. Much like Gloria Anzaldúa, Joyce Green, Layli Maparyan, and others who seek a global transformation, Talitha Kum seeks to "Awake the desire for dignity and justice. Transform with us exploitation with the power of care" (Talitha Kum 'Get Involved" 2022, par 2).

Furthermore, in section 2.2 I stated my intent to compare the activist efforts of the nuns described in these two case studies (in section 2.2, Network specifically) to Womanist, Indigenous feminist, and spiritual activist frameworks. In section 2.2, I also stated that one consideration of this thesis was to study the ways the nuns practice activism in order to increase the well-being of humanity. Based upon my research, I conclude that the intentions of both organizations are the latter, that is the ultimate aim is the well-being of humanity. However, there is an important difference between the two case studies examined herein. Network has, as an organization, vocally and visibly called attention to the harmful policies of the Vatican and the Catholic church as an institution. Not only have the Sisters at Network called attention to these issues, but they have also vocally opposed them. Talitha Kum, on the other hand, has received unwavering support from Pope Francis and the Vatican in their efforts. Some of the attitudes and behaviors of Network's nuns can be ascribed to their adherence to liberation theology or Catholic social justice teaching. One of the most visible ways that Network has opposed the Vatican was

through their very first tour with their sub-committee, Nuns on the Bus. As described in Section 2.1, the Sisters at Network, led by founder Sister Simone Campbell, faced immense pushback and even harassment from the Vatican and many Catholic Bishops after showing support for the Affordable Care Act. This pushback, according to the documentary *Radical Grace*, resulted in many of the women not necessarily questioning their faith, but questioning the institution through which they express their faith. Based on my research, while the Sisters at Network follow the guidance of Pope Francis, what they consider most important is sitting with, and deeply listening to those from social locations different than their own. To quote Sister Jane "Every person has different experiences. Activism is not what we think needs to be done, but what they say needs to be done" (Anonymous Sister at Network, 2022). Here it is evident that the actions demonstrated by the Sisters at Network were not inspired by support for ongoing colonization committed on behalf of their belief system, but rather, the Sisters were so deeply inspired by their faith that they sought the liberation of the poor.

The activist work of both Network and Talitha Kum also ascribes to anti-capitalist visions of work and productivity. To reference the article "The Fight against Human Trafficking Is Not Just a Numbers Game" by activist John Studzinski,

> There is a tension between accompaniment and impact in the field of international development. The tail has increasingly wagged the dog. Funders want to see evidence of impact, and this results in a focus on numbers: Tallies of women rescued, the people sheltered. I recently heard about a shelter that ejected human-trafficking survivors after a certain period to provide evidence that it had "rehabilitated" enough people to justify the further investment (Studzinski 2017, par 5).

Studzinski goes on to describe how this behavior sharply contrasts with the nuns he was working with (i.e., Redemptorist Sisters, also working towards ending human trafficking, some members of Talitha Kum, some not), and also with Talitha Kum. Studzinski specifically states that Talitha Kum ascribes to practicing patience, care, and letting survivors take the lead and go at their own pace. Additionally, based on this source, it is clear that for many of the consecrated women involved in this work, community building and bearing witness take precedence over numbers. While Talitha Kum certainly wants to help as many trafficking victims as possible, and Network wants to assist as many people affected by faulty systems as possible, they are both also concerned with listening to individual stories, and understanding how these individual stories make up a collective. In other words, the work of these consecrated women is not to meet quotas or work to achieve specific goals, but simply to bear witness and work towards creating a system that does not rely on relations of domination, particularly capitalism. For example, Studzinski recalls how the Sisters demonstrate beloved community and the absence of hierarchy. Studzinski joyfully writes about a moment when a group of nuns performs karaoke of ABBA's "Dancing Queen" with the survivors they were working with. In addition to demonstrating X, this specific example also points to the centrality of joy to spiritual activism, which is another way that spiritual activism sets itself apart from other activist practices.

These moments of joy align well with the Coyolxauhqui Imperative, a concept developed by Gloria Anzaldúa and elaborated on by AnaLouise Keating briefly introduced in Intro.1. As previously stated, Anzaldúa uses this story to describe the disembodiment that can result from systemic oppression such as cultural discrimination and isolation, white supremacy, racism, and settler colonialism. She describes the Coyolxauhqui imperative as a method of healing from wounds that occur due to the systems of domination listed above. For those with the lived

experience of having multiple intersecting marginalized identities, these systems leave many feeling fragmentary. Coyolxauhqui imperative centers the necessary transformation that is required to restore "inner completeness." I believe that moments of joy like the one described in Studzinski's piece, can uplift and support the healing of those who have been fragmented by systems of oppression. Additionally, the nuns at the center of this study prioritize building community. A community that shares moments of joy and sadness can also assist an entire community in helping one another progress towards healing. As spiritual activists have written about, this healing can lead to self-transformation which is the necessary foundation for eventual global transformation.

Another facet of this complicated issue to consider is whether or not the work that these women are doing considered to be operating within a liminal space that Anzaldúa refers to both in *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Light in the Dark.* In the instance of Network, we can see the strain the conservative nature of the Catholic church is taking on these women as evidenced in the documentary *Radical Grace*, and in Network's their press releases. Gloria Anzaldúa discusses liminal zones in great detail when describing her theory of nepantla and nepantleras. As briefly explained in section Intro.1, Anzaldúa began studying the concept of a liminal zone after reflecting on her childhood growing up on the border of Mexico and the United States. When she speaks about liminal zones, she is referring to how our social location shapes the way we form knowledge, and shapes the way our bodies experience the world. On nepantla Anzaldúa comments, "According to Jung, if you hold opposites long enough without taking sides, a new identity emerges. As you make your way through life, nepantla itself becomes the place you live in most of the time–home" (Anzaldúa/Keating 2015, 127). The knowledge one holds from their unique social location can be amplified when that social location is situated between multiple

identity categories and realms of existence. For me this quote highlights the way that Catholicism and social justice are often deemed to be opposites. In a description of nepantleras, Anzaldúa states, "We're not quite at home here but also not quite at home over there. Like queer or bisexual people who must live in both straight and gay worlds, or like rural people living in cities - stuck between the cracks of home and other cultures - we experience dislocation, disorientation (Anzaldúa/Keating 2015, 81). Therefore, I propose that living with the identity of being a Catholic nun while simultaneously living with the identity of being a social justice activist might be said to be existing within a liminal space. As they operate as social justice activists under the watchful eye of the Vatican, Sisters are not quite at home in either location. They are stuck between the cracks of home, in this case, Catholicism, and social justice-oriented values that the Church has either not always supported, currently does not support, or actively works against. Therefore, I argue that this situation may enable a liminal space for both the Sisters at Network and Talitha Kum. This liminal space becomes even more nuanced when we consider the multiple other identities these women hold, such as their race, ethnicity, ability, etc., and the worldview these intersectional identities create. In *Light in the Dark,* Anzaldúa compares a nepantla space to that of a bat in a cave hanging upside down. She states, "I make an instantaneous association of the bat man with border artists' nepantla stage–the dark cave of creativity where they hang upside down, turning the self upside down to see from another point of view, one that brings a new state of understanding (Anzaldúa/Keating 2015, 62). The nuns in this study who have left the comfort of their more privileged social location in the hierarchy of the Catholic church and sought to view their world "from upside-down" resonates well with Anzaldúa's thoughts on this subject. The above quote from Anzaldúa aligns with Sisters at both

organizations, and their mission to prioritize the voices of those who have experiences drastically different from their own

Finally, I conclude by once again restating what I asserted at the beginning of this section. Based on my research, the Sisters at Network and the Sisters that makeup Talitha Kum do share commonalities with many aspects of spiritual activism. I would even go as far as to say that these Sisters have performed acts of spiritual activism. However, labeling these sisters as "spiritual activists" is not the intention of this project. Rather, throughout chapters two, three, and four, I have drawn connections between the frameworks that encompass spiritual activist theory, and the activism and values practiced by both the Sisters at Network and Talitha Kum. In the following section, I explore in more depth Anzaldúa's concept of nepantleras and how it might be applied to the activist nuns centered in this thesis.

4.2: Nuns, Nepantla, and Nepantleras

As has been previously stated, the purpose of this thesis is not to draw a dichotomy between religion and spirituality in the realm of activism, but instead to discuss how multiple truths can exist at once. In this section I discuss how Anzaldúa's theory on might be applied to the actions of the activist nun organizations Talitha Kum, and Network. In the introduction of this thesis, I initiated a discussion of how the actions of these Sisters potentially align with Anzaldúa's description of nepantlera and their actions. To reiterate, Gloria Anzaldúa defines a nepantlera as an individual who has navigated a liminal zone, is constantly making the journey to each side, and is therefore uniquely qualified to act as a mediator on another person's nepantla journey. Operating from this definition, I argue that the Sisters discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 represent crucial aspects of the role of the nepantlera. To be specific, these Sisters exist in a liminal zone, have navigated it, continue to navigate it, and also hope to lead and assist others

through their own nepantla journeys as they envision a world where both Catholicism and liberation can mutually exist. On nepantleras Anzaldúa writes, "nepantleras are not constrained by one culture or world but experience multiple realities… [they] use competing systems of knowledge and rewrite their identities" (Anzaldúa 2015, 82). As previously described in Intro.1, nepantleras, who are uniquely equipped with spiritual knowledge, are constantly challenging the individualistic ideals of the western world. Anzaldúa also describes las nepantleras as spiritual activists who are simultaneously focused on achieving social justice and personal spiritual transformation. In many ways, this describes the activist nuns of Network and Talitha Kum.

The role of a nepantlera goes deeper than can be described in a few sentences, or even a few pages. There are many nuances and layers to this state of being that deserve further exploration and consideration. For example, in *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa states,

> Conocimiento of our interconnectivity encourages white women to examine and deconstruct racism and "whiteness." But perhaps, as Keating suggests, "white" women who are invested in this privileged identity can't be nepantleras: "I think that 'whiteness' is a state of mind–dualistic, supremacist, separatist, hierarchical…all the things we're working to transform; I'm still not sure how this concept of 'whiteness' as an oppressive/oppressing mind-set corresponds to light-skinned bodies, but I do believe the two are not synonymous (Anzaldúa/Keating 2015, 152).

Given Anzaldúa's comments here, when considering whether the actions of activist nuns are similar to those of las nepantleras, it is important to consider how many of the nuns I discuss here are white women. At the same time, it is important to recognize that being a white-skinned person and being invested in the power that comes with white privilege are not one and the same. While being "white" is racial identity, whiteness is a system of oppression that is perpetuated by

those who gain power based on their own white privilege and are constantly working (at times subconsciously) to keep that power. Whiteness also works to uphold systems such as racism, anti-Blackness, the prison industrial complex, capitalism, and more. While the Sisters at Network do show self-reflexivity and understanding of their social location as white women, it is also important to recognize that self-reflexivity alone does not dismantle the social institution of whiteness.

Anzaldúa addresses the complex nature of identity and binaries in *Light in the Dark*. She writes

> We stand at a major threshold in the extension of consciousness, caught in the remolinos (vortices) of systemic change across all fields of knowledge. The binaries of colored/white, female/male, mind/body are collapsing. Living in nepantla, the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems, you are aware of the change-ability of racial, gender, sexual, and other categories rendering the conventional labeling obsolete (Anzaldúa/Keating 2015, 119).

In this quote, Gloria Anzaldua envisions a future where we can look beyond categorizations of identity in order to foster interconnectivity. Based on my research, the Sisters at both Network and Talitha Kum envision a similar future. In other words, while some of the nuns may be white-skinned, they are willing to let go of the power and privilege their identity gives them in order to create an equitable and just world. With this, a key aspect in the definition of nepantleras that is crucial to examine concerning these particular nuns also stems from this section of *Light in the Dark*, "Nepantleras are not constrained by one culture or world but experience multiple realities… [they] use competing systems of knowledge and rewrite their identities" (Anzaldúa 2015, 82). A similarity here between Anzaldúa's original theory and the work of these activist

nuns is that the nuns existing and work within competing systems of knowledge. Liminal zones are key to nepantla, just as they are key to acting as a nepantlera. As I have expressed throughout my analysis of these activists' efforts, I argue that a concrete example of nuns demonstrating this work are the many press releases and public statements on political issues that Network has published, which reveal their commitment to self-reflexivity. Additionally, this self-reflexivity, as well as the nuns' openness to bringing others along on their nepantla journeys, demonstrates their ability to navigate the stages of Conocimiento as described in Intro.1.

As has been described previously, the Sisters at Network participate in many activist efforts such as rallies, pray ins, marches, and of course, listening tours with Nuns on the Bus. However, it is their written words and concrete political stances that have been one of their most powerful tools for drawing attention to their organization, and facilitating change. Their left-leaning politics have also exemplified their existence in a liminal zone. In this case, the liminal zone I am referring to is the space between a devotion to Catholic teaching and a devotion to liberation. Furthermore, these aforementioned stances (such as their stance in opposition to the Title 42) have been widely publicized in national news articles such as in the *National Catholic Reporter*[5], as well as press releases on their website; networklobby.org. Two of these press releases are "Running from the Past Is No Way to Dismantle Racism", and "Cultivating Inclusive Community during LGBTQIA+ History Month" which I described in more detail in section 2.2. In their press releases the Sisters call attention to how the Catholic church has either fallen short or perpetuated violence against marginalized groups. Furthermore, within their

[5] See Works Cited: "Four Catholic-Led Groups Working against President Donald Trump's Reelection" by Christopher White

statements the Sisters express a commitment to undoing this harm, and working for the liberation of all. The nuns' language of naming all people as members of the body of Christ is reminiscent of Anzaldúan thought in relation to the concept of global interconnectedness. In their choice of language, the nuns at Network boldly assert that non-normative sexualities do not make one less human. Therefore, the nuns recognize their mutual humanity with marginalized LGBQ+ folks. This is impactful for two reasons; first, it is not a stance the Catholic church has formally taken, and second, it aligns with Anzaldúa's theory of bridging across difference. Additionally, in their statement, 'Cultivating Inclusive Community during LGBTQIA+ History Month', the Sisters honor the fact that transgender individuals have knowledge that is incredibly valuable, and unique to their social location. This is exemplified by their statement "Transgender people are far more attuned than most of us to the reality that we human beings are a complex, mysterious, body-spirit creation of God, and they want nothing more than to honor that reality" (Schilder, Derouen 2021). The respect of the unique knowledge that comes from the lived experiences of trans people also aligns with Dr. Layli Maparyan's concept of reverence as described in section Intro.4. To reiterate, Maparyan describes reverence as a mutual respect born out of the awareness of our energies and vibrations. In Womanism, reverence is seen as a tool we can use to aid our understanding of the experiences of others. Additionally, reverence promotes the respect, care, and nurturance of those different experiences. I use this quote and call upon the concept of reverence to demonstrate a clear moment in which the Sisters at Network appear to recognize their liminality in their existence as social justice activists and consecrated Sisters. Moreover, being able to recognize other forms of liminality and marginalized knowledge is an important aspect of nepantla and nepantlera work.

Many of the actions of the Sisters of Talitha Kum also resemble Anzaldúa's descriptions of nepantlera actions. To sustain their work, Talitha Kum must be in constant dialogue with the Vatican while navigating their relationship with the Pope, while also authentically honoring their commitment to social justice. While Talitha Kum has received support from the Vatican in their efforts to help, shelter, and rehabilitate survivors of human trafficking as discussed in section 3.2, this is not necessarily where the goals of Talitha Kum end. Talitha Kum hopes to dismantle our current neoliberal capitalist system. Simultaneously, they envision a new world that does not rely on a global market that perpetuates the trafficking of human beings. To revisit a key quote from section 3.2,

> We denounce this unjust economic model that prioritizes profit over human rights, creates a culture of violence and commodification, and decreases funding for necessary social services, putting people at greater risk of being trafficked. This also affects programs of prevention, protection, support, integration, and reintegration of trafficked people. We denounce the widespread corruption that allows this evil to continue (Talitha Kum International Coordination Committee 2020, par. 3).

This quote makes visible that the Sisters at Talitha Kum recognize the possibility of a space where their devotion to Catholicism and their devotion to a liberated world can exist simultaneously. Their belief is aided by their commitment to working with people outside of the Catholic faith while remaining committed to their own Catholic identity. This is because spiritual activists are often proposing and creating new theories that often lie beyond or outside of identity politics. The Sisters' commitment to liberation for all, not just for practicing Catholics, aligns with the spiritual activist goals of recognizing our interconnectedness. When we study the role of

a nepantlera, we study people who can create new knowledge from a unique social location. This knowledge created in liminal spaces can, in theory, lead us to liberation.

Several groups of Catholic nuns have acted as social justice activists across history, some even going as far as to ascribe to liberation theology and Catholic social teaching. Network and Talitha Kum are only two examples of such nuns. The work that these women have participated in and continue to perform creates the opportunity for a new vision of organized religion. If these groups of activist nuns continue to show a commitment towards bridging across difference, bearing witness to the experiences of others, deeply listening, and striving to accept and understand multiple truths and epistemologies, I believe we could one day see a completely re-imagined Catholic church, and a completely reimagined world.

Appendix A
Interview questions

1. Feminist Scholar Gloria Anzaldúa describes her theoretical framework of spiritual activism as a practice that requires self-reflection in order to achieve both self-transformation, and eventually, social transformation. She, among other feminist scholars, give examples such as meditation, walking meditation, and fasting to help begin and sustain this process. How do you practice self-reflection, and how has your faith guided you through this process?

2. Do you have any personal rituals or practices that you participate in, in order to be able to continuously seek social justice, if so, what are they?

3. In her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) Anzaldúa explains the importance of "bearing witness" to the suffering and oppression of others in order to aim for understanding and then interconnectedness. She goes on to describe how interconnectedness is the only true path towards ending systems of domination such as patriarchy and white supremacy. How have you been able to "bear witness" through your time with Network, and how has this impacted your understanding of social activism?

4. How have you found community with Network, either with your fellow activists, or with the people you have met through your work?

5. Could you talk a little about Network's 2022 goals, and in what ways you will use social activism to achieve them?

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