

Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge

Volume 4

Issue 3 *Re-Membering Anzaldúa. Human Rights, Borderlands, and the Poetics of Applied Social Theory: Engaging with Gloria Anzaldúa in Self and Global Transformations*

Article 2

6-21-2006

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Winston Langley

University of Massachusetts Boston, winston.langley@umb.edu

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Recommended Citation

Langley, Winston (2006) "The Unbordered Borders," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 2.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol4/iss3/2>

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The Unbordered Borders

Winston Langley

University of Massachusetts Boston

winston.langley@umb.edu

Abstract: Many have taken on the task of purportedly advancing the cause of human rights by abstractly reciting them and clamoring for their implementation. Some speak about one's right to free speech and democracy, for example, with a convenient forgetting of the right to education, which can promote the type of dialogical encounter that is sponsoring of liberatory, integrative construction and reconstruction of self and human societies. Others champion the right to freedom, but not the right to food, careless of the fact that the hungry are un-free, left as they are to the crushing dictates of their bellies; and still others, while claiming to be leaders in the cause of human rights, have consistently engaged in conduct that is subversive of the very dignity that the recognition of those rights is supposed to advance and protect. The worse violation of those rights, however, has *not* been any specific item of conduct, but the general disregard for their moral inclusiveness or, as some might prefer to phrase it, the transcending of the moral exclusions that the human rights order (and the character and bearing of their poetics) was intended to ensure. That order says that the world is a single moral community or *cosmopolis*. In this community, the individual (not the state) is the basic unit, and the community of human beings is morally prior to the association of states. The human rights order goes further. It says that we, as individuals, are also borderlands, the sites of displacements, architectures, diasporas, geographies of memories and identities, and of creation and recreation. We are the unbordered borderlands who, to be truly human, must continuously interrogate the persons we are, the roles we serve, and the institutions we create.

It is particularly fitting that human rights should be paired in the title of this conference on borderlands and the poetics of applied social theory. Fitting because of many things, among them the origins, nature, and history of the modern human rights regime and the character and bearing of poetics.

As is well known, the modern focus on human rights dates from World War II, which was and is seen as having been caused by borderlands—the borderlands, according to the constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, that were defined by people's ignorance of each other's ways and

Winston Langley is Associate Provost for Academic Affairs and Professor of Political Science and international Relations at UMass Boston. His interests are in global order and public international law, human rights, alternative models of world order, and religion and politics. He teaches a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate courses including world politics and world order, international political economy, human rights and public policy, and images of world politics in film and literature. Recent publications include "Nuclear Weapons and the International Court of Justice" in *International Affairs*, and two books, *Women's Rights in the United States: A Documentary History*, and *Human Rights: The Major Global Instruments*.

lives; by suspicion and mistrust between and among peoples, because of their supposed differences; and by the borders of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, property, among others, as well as by the moral and social exclusion those borders represented and embodied.¹ When the human defilement which those exclusions permitted and even encouraged came to a state of suspended animation, the founders of the post-World War II international system, in a “never again” step of inspiration sought to begin an effort to rid the world of certain borders, to question the fixity of some, and to recommend a continuing interrogation of others, as a way of ensuring international peace and security.

This ridding-the-world-of-war effort began by affirming that all human beings partake of an attribute called dignity and that, by virtue of that dignity, they enjoy indefeasible claims to certain rights—the right to work, to a fair trial, to social security, to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, to medical care, to assembly, to food, to freedom of speech, to education, to housing, to freedom of movement, to participate in the cultural life of the community, and, among others, to freedom from torture and degrading treatment. Then, in the majestic non-discrimination clause of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the authors of that document—on our behalf—said that *everyone* (not just Sri Lankans, Norwegians, or Eskimos, but *everyone, without distinction of any kind* such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origins, property, birth or other status, such as political, jurisdictional, or international standing) is entitled to *all* the rights mentioned.²

Many have taken on the task of purportedly advancing the cause of human

rights by abstractly reciting them and clamoring for their implementation. Some speak about one’s right to free speech and democracy, for example, with a convenient forgetting of the right to education, which can promote the type of dialogical encounter that is sponsoring of liberatory, integrative construction and reconstruction of self and human societies. Others champion the right to freedom, but not the right to food, careless of the fact that the hungry are unfree, left as they are to the crushing dictates of their bellies; and still others, while claiming to be leaders in the cause of human rights, have consistently engaged in conduct that is subversive of the very dignity that the recognition of those rights is supposed to advance and protect. The worse violation of those rights, however, has *not* been any specific item of conduct, but the general disregard for their moral inclusiveness or, as some might prefer to phrase it, the transcending of the moral exclusions that the human rights order (and the character and bearing of their poetics) was intended to ensure. That order says that the world is a single moral community or *cosmopolis*. In this community, the individual (not the state) is the basic unit, and the community of human beings is morally prior to the association of states. If individuals and not states (or the latter’s social and other subdivisions) are the basic units of our universal community, then it follows that states can no longer be regarded as the principal reservoirs of international rights and responsibilities. Neither can the moral propriety of any international course of conduct be defined by the extent to which it is congruent with or corresponds to any self-defined national interest. Rather, such conduct must be assessed according to the degree to which it comports with and compatibly accommodates (in the poetics of applied social theory) the common concerns of all human beings, everywhere.³

The implications of the cosmopolitan thinking are immense: they mean, among

¹ See preamble to UNESCO’s constitution.

² See Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

other things, that we are humans before we are men, poor, women, Muslims, gay, socialists, presidents, or citizens; that everyone, without the usual privileged or disabling distinctions such as race, religion, language, or national or social origin, are entitled to all human rights; and they also mean that how a country treats human beings within its borders—including its citizens or co-religionists—is not some “internal domestic affairs” of the pre-1945 world, but the concern of all members of the human family. So we have wrongs not just against private persons or against nations, but against humanity. As well, when all the rights recognized are taken together—right to food; to speech; to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; against torture and degrading treatment; to privacy; to work; to health care; to a fair trial; to peace; and to an international social order protective of these rights, we are talking not of nations and national security but of *human security*, with security understood in psychological, moral, social, and cultural, as well as political terms.

The human rights order goes further. It says that we, as individuals, are also borderlands, the sites of displacements, architectures, diasporas, geographies of memories and identities, and of creation and recreation. We are the unbordered borderlands who, to be truly human, must continuously interrogate the persons we are, the roles we serve, and the institutions we create. To engage effectively in that interrogation, we must educate people not so much for some specific job (although particular job skills are very important and should be learned) but to help them experience the unfolding of their own personalities. Part of that unfolding is to be conscious of “embodying, being at, and understanding, borderlands,” especially as

we seek to grapple with the fact that our common civilization, constituted by many particular cultures and civilizations, is always endangered by ignorance of that which is common (hence the need for the poetics of applied social theory), as well as by the deliberate nurturing of oppositional identities which are elevatingly or degradingly constructed to serve questionable, self-defined ends.⁴

We need to interrogate borderlands, because it is a prerequisite to human completion, completion not as a finality of becoming but as a more comprehensive condition of being. That more comprehensive condition of being can be experienced only if we see education as a continuing conversation—the site of a non-hierarchical order among voices, of utterances whose richness and diversity cannot be censored in advance or in their freedom of movement, of a meeting place of various modes of discourse and imaginings, and of a cultural underpinning which says there is nowhere any pattern of action, condition of society, or mode of being that does not have some correspondence in our person; and that there is no social fence, no physical geography, no political cleavage that can bar the moral and mental instincts which say that we—all human beings—belong to a common homeland, earth, the universe.

The University of Massachusetts Boston, which should responsibly represent that universe, is pleased to welcome you to its campus, to this conference, to this portion of a continuing conversation.

³ See Winston Langley, “The significance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” in *Journal of Oriental Studies*, Vol. 37, #4 (1998), p.11.

⁴ See Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, eds., *Displacements, Diaspora, and geographies of Identity* (London: Duke University Press, 1996).