

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 11

6-21-2006

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Recommended Citation

Capetillo-Ponce, Jorge (2006) "Exploring Gloria Anzaldúa's Methodology in Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 11.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol4/iss3/11>

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Exploring Gloria Anzaldúa's Methodology in Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza

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Abstract: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza* does not fit into the usual critical categories simply because she follows inclination of interest, as opposed to working at achieving systematization. Not only does she shift continually from analysis to meditation, and refuse to recognize disciplinary barriers, but she speaks poetically even when dealing with cultural, political, and social issues. Indeed her method, like Simmel's, is more akin to "style" in art than it is to "analysis" or "inquiry" in the social sciences. A critic proclaims her/his own incompetence, however, if the mere fact that a text has a certain interdisciplinary quality scares him/her away from her/his rightful task of elucidating its various historical, philosophical, sociological, psychological, and literary elements. In this article, I herewith take up that pleasant task, via this brief sketch pointing us toward a deeper comprehension of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*.

NEW SYMBOLS, CODES, AND CATEGORIES

My initial reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* came in the winter of 2001, and immediately I was fascinated by the complexity and originality of her theory of the borderlands. She surprised me at every turn of the text, in each new chapter, by taking her analysis of the emergence of a New Mestiza consciousness into unexpected and unexplored territories. Her method of inquiry has revealed to me new intellectual, psychological, and spiritual spaces that are in the process of be-

ing formed via new symbols, codes, and categories, and has brought me fresh understandings of the complex and heterogeneous worlds that are emerging around us.

My initial fascination with *Borderlands* never waned, for I soon found myself dipping into the work again and again. I attribute this attraction to my training as a theorist, for I am always seeking, almost instinctively, to make sense of a particular work by tracing its theoretical and methodological influences and thereby situating it within a particular field or tradition. Thus, each new reading of *Borderlands* produced on my pad a new batch of notes on the var-

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ious theorists, artists, and methodological approaches that the text had brought to mind. It was only after Gloria's untimely death in 2004 that I decided to bring my notes together into a more systematic presentation of my thoughts.

An easy thing to think but not an easy thing to do, I soon discovered. For another look at my copious notes showed me a very diverse laundry-list of items: Marx, Vasconcelos, Said, Freud, dialectics, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, psychoanalysis, Nietzsche, Juan Rulfo, Foucault, Habermas, postmodernism, Mannheim, DuBois, Octavio Paz, Jung, Hillman, Weber, Carlos Castaneda, and Simmel! Was there really a chance I could arrive at any categorization that could make sense of that near chaos of persons and influences? And how could such a piecemeal approach hope to do justice to Gloria's theoretical and methodological unity in *Borderlands*? One can of course speak of her eclecticism, but that word doesn't even begin to suggest the complexity-within-unity of her method.

Gradually the realization dawned upon me that *Borderlands* doesn't fit into the usual critical categories simply because Anzaldúa follows inclination of interest, as opposed to working at achieving systematization. Not only does she shift continually from analysis to meditation, and refuse to recognize disciplinary barriers, but she speaks poetically even when dealing with cultural, political, and social issues. Indeed her method, like Simmel's, is more akin to "style" in art¹ than it is to "analysis" or "inquiry" in the social sciences.²

A critic proclaims her/his own incompetence, however, if the mere fact that a text has a certain interdisciplinary quality scares him/her away from her/his rightful task of elucidating its various historical, philosophical, sociological, psychological, and literary elements. Thus, I herewith take up that pleasant task, via this brief sketch pointing us toward a deeper comprehension of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*.

GLORIA ANZALDÚA MEETS "THE USUAL SUSPECTS"

The first theorist who popped into my mind, during my first reading of *Borderlands*, was Michel Foucault. The connection cropped up owing to my image of Anzaldúa as an archaeologist of knowledge, digging for concepts in her historic and mythic past, searching out such intellectual and spiritual ideas as nepantla, the Coatlicue state, the Shadow Beast, and the Virgin of Guadalupe, among many others. The immaterial findings unearthed by her digs seemed to me almost palpable methodological tools of real use in digging up discursive fields. Foucault's link to Anzaldúa also is grounded in the way her analysis in *Borderlands* always is touching upon postmodern, postnational, postcolonial identities. The problem with calling *Borderlands* a bit of postmodernism, however, is that the latter term has gradually become an empty signifier, one that can be filled with almost any content. Thus, even were we all to agree that

¹ If we are going to assert that Anzaldúa's method in *Borderlands* is more akin to "style" in art than to "analysis" in the social sciences, it is thereby incumbent upon us to analyze the origins of that "style" and of her art, with special attention being paid to its non-western (prehispanic, Mexican, Latin American and Afro-Caribbean) influences. Some of that is touched upon in a piece I have written that compares *Borderlands* with Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. It is available upon request (jorge.capetillo@umb.edu). Other Mexican and Chicano influences that I have detected in *Borderlands* are Vasconcelos's idea of the cosmic race, Carlos Castaneda's mystic writings such as *The Teachings of Don Juan*, and, more related to Gloria's literary style, Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Paramo*, where the chthonic, underworld element permeates the work. There is the implicit presence in her worldview or "style" of such early and influential Chicano writers as Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez, Toms Rivera, Rudolfo Anaya, and Oscar "Zeta" Acosta.

² For a discussion of Simmel's method see Capetillo, J. "Deciphering the Labyrinth: The Influence of Georg Simmel on the sociology of Octavio Paz." *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol 22 (6), pp. 95-121.

Borderlands is a “postmodern” work, we still would have to ask “what type of postmodernism are we talking about?”³

Our best and simplest approach, I think, will be simply to compare and contrast Anzaldúa's work with those classical and contemporary theorists and traditions that I am playfully denominating “the usual suspects.” And what better place could there be, to begin our interrogations, than with Marx, and more specifically with that dialectical method that Hegel invented and Marx made famous? And indeed, at a superficial level, Anzaldúa's method seems dialectical. In *Borderlands* she limns the contours of a native, prehispanic Mexican heritage that can be taken as thesis, explores the Spanish cultural conquest that can serve as antithesis, and finally describes the emergence of an implicitly synthetic Mexican culture. Then the whole process plays itself out yet again in modern times, but now with Mexican culture as thesis, the Anglo political and economic conquest of part of Mexico (where Anzaldúa grew up) as antithesis, and the New Mestiza consciousness as synthesis.

Both of those examples are of course crudely simplistic presentations of Anzaldúa's dialectics, for no serious dialectician ever pictures, as mere cause-and-effect thinkers do, influences flowing in one direction only. For Marx and those dialecticians who have followed him, one factor may have an impact on another, but it is just as likely that the latter will simultaneously impact the former. I do still believe, however, that Anzaldúa draws some of her inspira-

³ In other words, even if we agree that postmodernism rejects all truth-claims on the grounds that they mask and serve particular interests, and that even as it critiques the standard methods of inquiry it ends up introducing new methods that then become subject to the same critical review, the issue remains of how and why Anzaldúa's method in *Borderlands* is part of this intellectual trend. For an interesting discussion of methodology and postmodernism see Clarke, A.E. *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn*. London: Sage, 2005.

tion from the dialectical method. After all, the New Mestiza herself is a figure born of the dialectic of races.

Then too, Anzaldúa revels in such two-way transits as that between the extremes of oppression and resistance, with the ever-increasing tension between them at last producing a liberatingly synthetic moment or effect. More basic and more satisfying, however, is Anzaldúa's clear awareness of how much rich cultural ore can be mined by assiduously studying the development of contradictions one stumbles upon. Anzaldúa clearly realizes her dialectic method in the midst of her explorations of the borderlands, where she finds “the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.” (Anzaldúa 1999: 25), and also in her imaginative reappraisals of such seemingly overworked cultural symbols as the Virgin of Guadalupe: [She is] “the most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered” (Anzaldúa 1999: 52).

While Anzaldúa brings her dialectical analysis to bear upon immaterial/idealistic/cultural phenomena, as opposed to those material/economic realities that were Marx's only professed concern, there is more than just dialectics that links these two figures. Given that *Borderlands* is in essence a treatise on the alienated self of the Mestiza—as when its author tells us that “in order to escape the threat of shame and fear, one takes on compulsive, repetitious activity as though to busy oneself, to distract oneself, to keep awareness at bay” (Anzaldúa 1999: 67)—Marx's concepts of both alienation and false-consciousness can't help but come to mind. And even the dialectical link itself is hard to pin down, for it can be argued that Anzaldúa's dialectical method is more Hegelian or even Simmelian than Marxist.

Granted, Anzaldúa is close to Marx in

that both are intent upon making room for all minor voices. Marx integrates all such alienated voices into one all-embracing concept: the proletariat; Anzaldúa offers her reader a fascinating mixture of particular groups differentiated on the basis of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and cultural alienation—there are the queer, the Mestiza, the “Chicano-mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures” (Anzaldúa 1999: 52). Where our author returns to the Hegelian root of dialectics, however, is in her habit of situating all societal events within the mind of individuals, within ideas. She has if not a Hegelian then a psychologistic conception of society, one that sees all societal interactions as above all the interaction of psychic entities. This essential aspect of her methodology does indeed remind me of Simmel, a sociologist who introduced psychological elements into his method of analysis and who sees reality as a paradoxical coexistence of extremes, bound by a never-ending tension that is only temporarily surpassed by the creative act.

Anzaldúa certainly never attempts in *Borderlands* to draw any clearcut distinction between base and superstructure, between the material world below and ideas hovering above—it is as if she is telling us that ideas and material world are so intimately intertwined that no mission could be more impossible than that of trying to pry the two apart. Here our problem with Gloria Anzaldúa—the supposed dialectician—again raises its head, however, for in the absence of any sustained effort to divide the world into opposing categories that then slowly synthesize through the march of events, can a thinker’s method truly be called “dialectical” at all?

Perhaps we can acquire a better understanding of *Borderlands* by picking up on the Simmelian hint and shifting from a sociological to a psychological mode of analysis. For while on a superficial level—by which I mean the conscious level, the level cluttered

with all those troublesome socio-political-economic realities we face everyday—Anzaldúa’s method seems dialectical, at root her concern is not at all with the play of material conditions or ideas per se, but rather with what she calls herself the “chthonic,” the underworld, the unconscious, the domain that Freud, Jung, Hillman, and so many others have devoted their lives to explore. If Freud’s ego and superego are born from every self’s negotiation with the external, social world and hence are inherently dialectical and conscious, we can say that Anzaldúa is more interested in what Freud considered the oldest part of the mind, the id, out of which the other structures have been derived. Within the id there is no space for contradictions or opposing categories, for as Freud points out it is “the primitive, unorganized, and emotional realm of the illogical, where categories of time and space do not exist, and where contraries like dark/light and high/deep are treated as if they were identical” (Storr 1989: 46). One certainly doesn’t have to look far in *Borderlands* for passages that delve deep into that realm, such as this one:

After each of my four bouts with death I’d catch a glimpse of an otherworld Serpent. Once, in my bedroom, I saw a cobra the size of a room, her hood expanding over me. ...I realized she was, in my psyche, the mental picture and symbol in its collective, impersonal, pre-human. She, the symbol of the dark sexual drive, the chthonic (underworld) the feminine, the serpentine movement of sexual creativity, the basis of all energy and life. (Anzaldúa 1999: 57)

What we see in this superlatively Anzaldúan passage is the clever way in which our author reshapes those concepts and categories of Freud’s that are based upon western culture and especially the male charac-

ters and myths of classical Greece, re-people them with female characters drawn from a prehispanic and Mexican mythological past. Of course this is not merely a matter of changing names from Greek to Nahuatl; it is a complete rejection of Freud's phallo-Eurocentric methodological approach and the creation of a new interpretive framework of psychic entities based on Gloria's own culture. Her own myths, her own heritage, become vessels for a new interpretive venture, at the heart of which one finds such enduringly Mexican archetypes as the docile and enduring Virgin of Guadalupe, the raped and dishonored La Chingada or Malinche, and the long-suffering mother perpetually in search of her lost children: La Llorona.

This methodological turn allows Anzaldúa to show how the above-mentioned female archetypes have in the past been partitioned and weakened by a violent, divisive, and dominating male ethos. In order to go beyond Freud's dualism—Freud explained mental phenomena in terms of the interaction of, and the conflict between, opposites—Anzaldúa relies on Jung's archetypal vision, where Freud's dualist instincts of Eros and Thanatos are locked in perpetual combat, thereby creating a unified form capable of serving as an analytical tool. Precisely such a tool is implicitly wielded by Anzaldúa herself, when she sees the same sort of tension between extremes embodied in Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess who for Anzaldúa "depicts the contradictory. In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated" (Anzaldúa 1999: 69).

Clearly for Anzaldúa Coatlicue is not just one more primordial archetype, swimming up to us out of the mists of Jung's *spiritus mundi*; she is also a state of consciousness, and thereby a method of interpreting reality. Almost like another Don Juan (Carlos Castaneda's not Byron's), Anzaldúa bids us to enter what she calls the "Coatlicue state" and therein acquire new insights into

the complex relations between domination, resistance, and liberation. The insights can be thought of as almost secondary, however; this is above all a therapeutic realm, a place where the sojourner can recreate a sense of wholeness, of unity, in a divided world. In this sense Anzaldúa's method, like Freud's, is not merely analytical but also transformative.

Thus, in a similar fashion in which ideas and the material world confront each other but are inseparable in her sociology, the use of archetypes bring a similar effect to her psychology. In one seemingly enigmatic passage, Anzaldúa alludes to a reality that is "older than Freud" (Anzaldúa 1999: 48). I believe she is talking about that unified reality that existed before Freud and other males insisted on seeing the world through lenses distorted by dualism. As she points out: "The dualism of light/darkness did not arise as a symbolic formula for morality until primordial darkness had been split into light and dark. Now darkness, my night, is identified with the negative, base and evil forces—the masculine order casting its dual shadow" (Anzaldúa 1999: 71).

Passages of that kind give the reader some hint, I hope, of the difficulty of disentangling the sociological and psychological strands in Anzaldúa's thinking. Its synthetic quality has its rewards, however, as seen in the ingenious way she traces out the first of the two dialectical movements I alluded to earlier, the one leading us from a prehispanic indigenous culture, as thesis, to the Spanish conquest as antithesis, to a new synthetic Mexican culture. For Anzaldúa the prehispanic culture is best exemplified by the Olmec civilization, the oldest-known civilization of prehispanic Mexico. This is presented as a non-dualist, holistic culture, a utopian past redolent of the primordial id, with the colonizing Spanish culture being depicted (as the Anglo culture in the second dialectical movement) as a "white and official" culture, an oppressive culture that inevitably reminds us of the superego, with its

individually paralyzing mores and restrictions. There is of course no progression in Freudian thought, in the sense of a synthesis that takes us up to a new level. Thus we see again Anzaldúa thinking dialectically but feeling and speaking holistically. And yet there is of course a dialectic at work right there too!

Thus we cannot be too surprised to find that the most cherished end-products of her thinking—the synthetic Mexican culture in her first dialectical movement, and the New Mestiza in her second one—strike us as being still rather fragile concepts in-progress. The fragility is in essence the same as our own, for each of us is an ego, a mind-made entity caught up in the ongoing struggle between the primordial id and the external superego. Indeed the final synthetic product of *Borderlands*, the New Mestiza, seems to stand in dire need, as we all do, of adaptation, flexibility, and tolerance, with these allowing her to grow and to follow the call of that self preservation which is for Freud the primal function of the ego.

THE PRIESTESS AT THE CROSSROADS

Perhaps Marx comes as close as he ever does to being an idealist when he asserts that the arrival of class-consciousness represents the apex, the crowning synthetic moment, of history's dialectical progress. I mention this fact even though Anzaldúa does not base her analysis on the tension between social classes; nonetheless, for her, too, the advent of new knowledge is transformative. And yet such knowledge emerges only as a result of living amid a multiplicity of realities—the borderlands—and therefore we get a synthesis of a much more personally painful and existential sort than that envisioned by the old Eurocentric dialecticians:

Every time she [the New Mestiza] makes "sense" of something, she

has to "cross over", kicking a hole out of old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it.... It is a dry birth, a breech birth, a screaming birth, one that fights every inch of the way. It is only when she is on the other side and the shell cracks open and the lid from her eyes lifts that she things in a different perspective. It is only then that she makes the connections, formulates the insights (Anzaldúa 1999: 71).

The New Mestiza's dry, breech, screaming birth is clearly a liminal experience, a threshold phase or transformative period within which real and profound changes are taking place. All such talk always brings to my mind the man who told us that "man is a thing that must be overcome," Friedrich Nietzsche. Indeed, after reading the passage above, Nietzsche's Zarathustra came immediately to mind, and his presence was further consolidated by this other passage from *Borderlands*: "Su cuerpo es una bocacalle [her body is a crossroad]. La mestiza has gone from being the sacrificial goat to becoming the officiating priestess at the crossroads" (Anzaldúa 1999: 102).

Even within the confines of this short essay, Marx and Anzaldúa have been strange bedfellows, given that even the former's cherished "class consciousness" is for him merely epiphenomenal, in the sense that it arises strictly out of the maneuverings of the "real" economic relations at work in society. Standing in stark contrast is the way both Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Anzaldúa's New Mestiza reach their higher grounds via painfully individualistic efforts, whose payoff takes the shape of new value systems, of meanings that go beyond good and evil. In Anzaldúa's words:

As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out, yet all coun-

tries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover (lesbian). I have no race, my own people disclaim me, but I am all races because there is the queer in me in all races. I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos, yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. Soy un amasamiento. I am an act of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meaning (Anzaldúa 1999: 103).

It seems I am not alone in having thought of Nietzsche when reading passages such as that one in *Borderlands*, for the philosopher Salah Al Moncef takes the Nietzschean self as his own reference point, to come to grips with the New Mestiza. As he sees it, that self

remains haunted by an exclusive logic centered around the limitative values of an elitist phallo and Eurocentric philosophy. By contrast, Anzaldúa inscribes her conception of the hybrid woman within a philosophical frame that manages to supersede the logic of exclusion with its categories of good and evil, self and other, high and low, master (race) and slave (race), purity and impurity, (technocratic) elite and (democratic) herd (Al Moncef 2002: 41).

I begin to respond to that assessment by

agreeing with Al Moncef in that there is no essential superiority, no logic of exclusion in *Borderlands*. Still, we can speak of a sense of unique progression or evolution in the New Mestiza's character that sets her apart. In short, my question is: Try as Anzaldúa may to free her methodology from any and every logic of exclusion, can one really rest assured that there is no trace of elitism in it? Would not a Marxist critic, for instance, see in her implicit conception of evolution as a highly personalized, identity-thought-torment process, merely a new and more refined form of distinction? As a sociologist, I would have loved to have the opportunity to ask Gloria about her take on completely different processes of consciousness-formation, for example those that evolve within the safe and remote space of a suburban home. Can the New Mestiza consciousness really find a way to take root even in such a terrain?

I have many other questions for Gloria Anzaldúa regarding her *Borderlands*. For instance: What sort of public space does the emergence of a New Mestiza consciousness create? How can Anzaldúa's proposal be compared to other theories of cosmopolitanism?⁴ And besides the western usual suspects, we have to analyze in depth the non-western, Mexican, and Chicano influences on her work and her art. That is, we have to explore both sides of the borderlands to arrive at a full understanding of Gloria's unique theory and method.

⁴ When we compare Anzaldúa's method and theory to other theories of cosmopolitanism, we must understand that Mestizaje is not egocentric or ethnocentric; that is, it is not a matter of creating one identity by choosing from a tempting smorgasbord of options, as a person does when living in the "cultural salad bar" represented by major urban centers as New York City, Boston, Paris, and Mexico City. Rather, the very situation and character of the New Mestiza is all about finding oneself simultaneously enmeshed in multiple cultural backgrounds. Thus implicit to Mestizaje is the notion that a multifaceted person, culture, or community is not so much a nexus of choice as it is, as Burke rightly points out, a place "of rich, unfolding, complex, hermeneutical histories" (Burke 1999: 136).

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