

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 26

6-21-2006

Moderator Commentary: Not Just Surviving but Fully Relishing the Borderlands, Defiantly and Triumphantly

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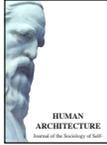
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Recommended Citation

Srikanth, Rajini (2006) "Moderator Commentary: Not Just Surviving but Fully Relishing the Borderlands, Defiantly and Triumphantly," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 26.

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Moderator Commentary

Not Just Surviving but Fully Relishing the Borderlands, Defiantly and Triumphantly

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Abstract: Anzaldúa emphasized, and presenters on the panel confirm, that true revolution and social transformation can only take place when we are willing to imagine paradigms that disrupt the rigidity of either/or constructions. The notion of “borderlands” is, of course, central to such a disruption. When I first encountered Anzaldúa’s poem “To live in the Borderlands means you,” I felt I was returning to one of my earliest memories, a story I had heard often in my childhood and youth. Anzaldúa concludes her poem with the words “To survive the Borderlands,/ you must live *sin fronteras*/ be a crossroads.” I appreciate her urging the reader to dwell in the crossroads, to refuse to be placed within any one camp, to resist being categorized and labeled, but I am puzzled by Anzaldúa’s use of the word “survive.” That word suggests that there is something unpleasant about the borderlands; that it is a place in which one would rather not be if one were not forced to remain in it. To see the borderlands as an unwelcome place is to capitulate to the dominant paradigm that demands that we choose which side we’re on, that sees as weakness the need to recognize value in diverse, even conflicting, perspectives. So, I say to Anzaldúa, I choose not just to survive the borderlands, but to relish it. I proudly persist in it defiantly and triumphantly. There is power in the borderlands, potency in the middle spaces. Let us not minimize the great energy of the in-between.

The four papers in this panel on the spiritual dimensions of social transformation as they relate to Gloria Anzaldúa’s work all draw on her refusal to be locked into a dualistic mode of thinking. Anzaldúa emphasized, and these presenters confirm, that true revolution and social transformation can only take place when we are willing to imagine paradigms that disrupt the rigidity of either/or constructions. The notion of “borderlands” is, of course, central

to such a disruption.

Michelle Corbin rejects the divide between spirituality and rationality by turning to Anzaldúa’s call for a “spiritual activism.” Spirituality need not connote a preoccupation with individual inward states; rather, immersing oneself in spiritual self-regeneration demands a commitment to improving the world for all of one’s fellow human beings, argues Corbin. Sharon Kim offers us a portrait of the “hybrid spiritual-

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ity” among second generation Korean Americans; they combine elements of “Confucianism, Korean Christianity, and various expressions of American Evangelicalism,” she writes, underscoring the futility of containing this creative identity construction within standard models of assimilation, integration, and acculturation (all of which require from the minority group in question conformity to a dominant narrative of being). Karen Gagne’s paper reminds us of the power of poetry, art, and the creative forms of expression. Such knowledge moves us toward revolution and transformation because the language of poetry lets us tap into our innermost desires and aspirations. Anzaldúa’s penchant for metaphoric language is a clear indication that she understood the power of symbol and poetry as a vehicle for change. Gagne urges us to wrest poetics from its confinement in the humanities and bring it into the realm of social change. Mohammad Tamdgidi asks us to consider the self anew, to see it not in opposition to the collective or the social group but as the site from which all revolution occurs. Without the self’s release from its own limited ways of knowing, there can be no social or collective change, Tamdgidi contends. To pose the self/collective dichotomy is unproductive to large scale transformation. All four presenters do full justice to the idea of Anzaldúa’s borderlands as the space of birth and rebirth.

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I end with the mythological story that Anzaldúa’s poem reminded me of from my childhood. This story has only recently revealed its great power to me, so I treasure it as a newly discovered gift. I’ve written about it in my book *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (2004), and it is from there that I excerpt it:

A certain demon wanted unlimited powers and so decided to pray long and hard to God. The sincerity of his worship so impressed God that He decided to grant the demon any wish that he desired. The demon asked for immortality, but God told him that immortality was reserved only for the divine and could not be granted to a human. Believing himself to be shrewd and capable of outsmarting God, the demon then rephrased his request as a set of conditions, thinking that by so doing he had anticipated and rendered void all the circumstances under which he could conceivably lose his life. “I wish to die neither on earth nor on heaven, neither indoors nor outdoors, neither in daylight nor in darkness, and to meet my death neither at the hands

of man nor beast." God granted the demon his wish. Complacent in his supposed immortality, the demon renewed with increased vigor his campaign of terror and killing, bringing destruction upon those around him. One day, when he was warned by his God-fearing son that he would invite the wrath of God upon himself, the demon dismissed the power of God and flaunted the protection offered by the wish that he had been granted. It was the hour of twilight, and at that instant, there emerged from the pillar in his palace, a creature that was half-human, half-lion, who proceeded to lift the demon and carry him to the threshold of his home. There, between the indoors and outdoors, in the twilight (neither daylight nor darkness), the creature who was neither wholly human nor wholly beast lifted the demon off the ground and, holding him in the air (so that he was neither on earth nor in the heavens), tore the life out of him. (19)

This story illustrates to perfection the dangers of a dualistic mode of thinking. The demon believed that he had envisioned all possible scenarios because his imagination could not conceive the vast space between two opposite ends, between two polarities. His small mind "effectively put the chains on his imagination and led him to delineate a restricted reality based on the limited constructs of his consciousness" (19). Unlike the demon, the four presenters on this panel break the chains of a paradigm of dualities and show us the landscape of unlimited possibilities.