

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

ScholarWorks @ UTRGV

Philosophy Faculty Publications and
Presentations

College of Liberal Arts

2020

Three Existentialist Readings of Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands/La Frontera

Mariana Alessandri

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/phi_fac



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alessandri, Mariana, "Three Existentialist Readings of Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands/La Frontera" (2020). *Philosophy Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 6.
https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/phi_fac/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

THREE EXISTENTIALIST READINGS OF GLORIA ANZALDÚA'S *BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA*

MARIANA ALESSANDRI

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

I will not be shamed again
Nor will I shame myself
–Gloria Anzaldúa¹

Abstract: This essay provides three new and related philosophical readings of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*: 1) in the lineage of canonical European Existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre, who provides an analysis of shame; 2) in the lineage of Mexican Existentialists like Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz, who attribute a relative of shame to Mexicans; and 3) in dialogue with Africana Existentialists like Franz Fanon, who describe the bodily shame of nonwhites in racist societies. Anzaldúa's concept of "linguistic terrorism," which existentially translates into *la vergüenza lingüística*, extends the scope of European, Africana, and Mexican Existentialisms while putting all three in dialogue for the first time, and serves as a first attempt at formulating a Chicana Existentialism.

Keywords: Gloria Anzaldúa, Phenomenology, Existentialism, Africana Existentialism.

María Lugones, Mariana Ortega, Linda Martín Alcoff, Andrea Pitts, Cynthia Paccacerqua, and Alexander Stehn are among the academic philosophers who read Gloria Anzaldúa as a philosopher. Ortega, along with Communications scholar Jacqueline M. Martinez reads Anzaldúa through the lens of Phenomenology, comparing her ideas and methods to those of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Ortega 2016; Martinez 2000, 2013). I suggest that we pivot, however, and put Anzaldúa in conversation with European Existential figures like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre. She explicitly located herself in this lineage by recounting her early philosophical acquaintance with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in elementary school, calling herself "that kind of kid" (Reuman

¹ Anzaldúa places this couplet in Chapter 7 of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, in the section entitled "El Día de la Chicana."

31).² But we would miss something if we did not also see Anzaldúa's work as growing out of the Mexican Existentialist tradition. It is clear from her reference in *Borderlands* to *La raza cósmica* (1925) that Anzaldúa read Jose Vasconcelos, which means she likely read Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz, both of whom asked what it meant to be Mexican. Their answers likely informed her own view of what it means to be Mexican-American living along the US-Mexico border. The shame and perhaps inferiority she felt existing in-between cultures resonates with their account of Mexicans, who suffer from the history of conquest and colonization. Finally, there is much insight to be gained from reading Anzaldúa alongside Africana Existentialists like James Baldwin, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Franz Fanon, who write about the inescapability of blackness.³ Like these authors, Anzaldúa describes existing in a nonwhite body in a particular time in history within a given set of economic constraints and oppressive political circumstances.

This is not a historical essay but a philosophical one. It develops three readings of Anzaldúa as Existentialist philosopher and as intellectual bridgebuilder connecting European, Mexican, and Africana philosophies. Scholars know that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Vasconcelos directly influenced Anzaldúa, but the degree to which other European, Africana, and Mexican

² Søren Kierkegaard was Anzaldúa's first philosophical love. She claims to have read him early, and he affected her profoundly. An explicit reference to Kierkegaard survived late drafts of *Borderlands/La Frontera* before she excised it. Anzaldúa claims to have been moved by his *Sickness unto Death*, from which she reworked the Kierkegaardian concepts of despair and sin. In Kierkegaard, Anzaldúa claims to have found someone whose despair "equaled [her] own" (*Reader* 235). On the basis of Kierkegaard alone, it would be appropriate to read Anzaldúa an Existentialist. Like him, she was invested in the project of describing how it is to exist, especially in a brown body and with a misfit tongue. See Alessandri, forthcoming in *El Mundo Zurdo* and in *Taking Kierkegaard Personally*.

³ Including the European tradition, designation of this branch of philosophy is complicated. Albert Camus famously did not want to be called an Existentialist, though Sartre did. Kierkegaard is sometimes called a "forerunner" or even "father" of Existentialism. Lewis Gordon uses the term "Black" more than "Africana," when referring to this field of study, which he alternately calls "existential philosophy" or "philosophy of existence." He makes clear that not all Africana philosophy is existentialist (Gordon 4).

Existentialists influenced her has not been adequately examined. Instead of locating these historical connections, I focus on one theme that spans all three Existentialisms: shame. I contend that Anzaldúa's description of shame challenges Sartre's, much like Franz Fanon did, but from a Chicana perspective. Her theory of "linguistic terrorism" and my formulation of its existential manifestation—*la vergüenza lingüística*—connects the three branches of Existentialism by highlighting a condition shared by many Hispanics raised in the United States. This essay is written in five parts. In part one, I offer initial reasons to read Anzaldúa as an Existentialist and not just a Phenomenologist. In the second section, I lay out Sartre's description of shame from *Being and Nothingness (L'Être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique, 1943)*, which is considered the classic Existentialist account of shame. In part three, I review Fanon's critique of Sartre and highlight one striking affinity between Anzaldúa and Africana Existentialism. Part four shows how Anzaldúa's account of shame is continuous with the Mexican Existentialist fixation on inferiority. Finally, part five uses Anzaldúa's concept of "linguistic terrorism" to showcase one of the ways that Chicana Existentialism can make a unique contribution to philosophy by examining the connections between language, identity, and shame.

Part I: Anzaldúa as Existentialist

My reading of Anzaldúa as an Existentialist faces two related obstacles: 1) when read as a philosopher, Anzaldúa usually gets read as a Phenomenologist rather than as an Existentialist; 2) the field of Chicana Existentialism does not officially exist yet.

In *Phenomenology of Chicana Experience and Identity* (2000), Jacqueline Martinez argues that Anzaldúa and other Chicanas used a phenomenological method remarkably similar to Husserl's, to "focus our attention on the life world and the lived experience of persons [...] because it recognizes the inherent interrelatedness of human conscious experience and the fact of our locatedness in time, place, history, and culture" (ix). Martinez claims that Chicana phenomenologists first "stop the natural flow of our conscious awareness," then "look at it from different

angles,” and finally “understand the social structures that allowed that thing to show up as such to begin with” (x).⁴

Like Martinez, Mariana Ortega reads Anzaldúa through Phenomenology, specifically tying her to Martin Heidegger. In *In-Between* (2016), Ortega invokes Heidegger’s concepts of “*Dasein*” and “being-in-the-world” to support the thesis that Anzaldúa’s narrative and poetic “I” is more existential than ontological.⁵ Despite the conceptual resonances of my reading with Ortega’s, I believe there is just as much, if not more, to be gained from reading Anzaldúa alongside European, Mexican, and Africana Existentialists.

A book titled *Chicana Existentialisms* does not yet exist, but before 1997, *Existence in Black* did not either. Thanks to Lewis Gordon, Africana Existentialism is a recognizable and well-respected field of inquiry. Black philosophers in and out of the United States ask timely questions about what it means to occupy black bodies in White Supremacist societies. Gordon describes the field of Africana Existentialism as “a philosophical practice that is premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation” (3). Franz Fanon is an Africana Existentialist insofar as, Tendayi Sithole observes, “[his] concern is the existential condition of the black subject” (178). In a similar way, we can begin to develop a Chicana Existentialism with Anzaldúa at the helm.

Like Gordon, Carlos Sánchez recovered a piece of the Mexican Existentialist tradition, specifically as it thrived between 1948-1952. *Contingency and Commitment* (2016) tells the story of el *Grupo Hiperión*, which included Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla, Joaquín Sánchez MacGregor, Luis Villoro, and Ricardo Guerra. Sánchez reads these philosophers as beginning not with universal principles, but with local, embodied experiences of being Mexican within certain econo-political situations. He argues

⁴ In 2013, Martinez put Anzaldúa in conversation with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, (who sometimes gets classified as an Existentialist, but not in this case) claiming that both authors focus on the importance of culture and communication. Martinez reads Anzaldúa’s concepts of “borderlands,” “consciencia de la mestiza,” and “la facultad” as primarily phenomenological interventions (226).

⁵ For a reading of Ortega’s “Existential I” in dialogue with Anzaldúa, see Newton and Sinclair.

that using their existential condition as a point of departure often landed these thinkers on as universal a theory as Existential philosophy can ever hope for (87-8). Like Gordon, Sánchez left behind a narrative thread of Mexican Existentialist thought for scholars to pick up and continue developing.

The idea of a Chicano Existentialism is not new, but it is anemic and phallogocentric. Three years before Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga published *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), San Jose State Professor of Mexican American Studies Elihu Carranza published *Chicanismo: Philosophical Fragments*. It is a description of being Chicano in the United States, of enduring the process of erosion and assimilation. Carranza describes a hyphenated existence similar to the one that Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The hyphen between Mexican and American is a defining one for many Chicanxs, one that they fall into, feeling rejected by both cultures. In 1984, Jessie Contreras, Doctoral Student at Berkeley, wrote a dissertation under prominent Heidegger scholar Hubert Dreyfus, titled “Existential Phenomenology and its Influence on Mexican and Chicano Philosophy and Philosophy of Education.” Contreras tied the history of Chicano Studies programs in the US to Mexican Existentialist thought, specifically as it was formulated by the association of Mexican scholars and artists *Ateneo de Juventud* at the beginning of the 20th Century and the *Grupo Hiperión* in the 1940s and 50s. The dissertation is a genealogy of Chicano male thought read through the lens of Existentialism.⁶ It is in light of these (exclusively male) histories that we can develop a Chicana Existentialism as surely as Gordon and Sánchez did with *Africana* and Mexican Existentialisms.

Because of her subject position, in this essay I read Anzaldúa as having more in common with Fanon and Paz than Husserl or Heidegger. I will show that, like Fanon, Anzaldúa’s philosophical concern is the existential condition of the colonial subject, and her ideas provoke questions about freedom, anguish,

⁶ Contreras seems to have been woefully ignorant of women of color feminists. He makes no reference to *This Bridge Called my Back*, which was published by Persephone Press in 1981, presumably while he was researching his dissertation on Chicano Studies. He also fails to account for Chicana authors in his intellectual history, which ranges from 19th Century Mexico to 1983 in California.

responsibility, embodied agency, sociality and liberation. *Borderlands/La Frontera* draws attention to the concrete lived experience of the Chicana subject, and her descriptions reveal a concern for the liberation of embodied Chicanas. Anzaldúa scholars have shown that her account of “linguistic terrorism” teaches us something new about the existential reality of Mexican-Americans in Deep South Texas, but no one yet has read it as a critique of Sartrean shame.

Part II: Sartre on Shame

By the time Anzaldúa found Kierkegaard, Sartre had already written his famous phenomenology of shame in *Being and Nothingness*. It is no surprise that the man who wrote “hell is other people” also believed that “the other is the hidden death of my possibilities” (“No Exit”; *Being* 354). Sartre’s “other” limits me when he sees me. If I’m lucky, Sartre says, the other sees me as a “fascinating object,” but since I’m not in control, Sartre calls being seen a “danger” (484). I need the other to reflect me back to myself, but I do not know which me he will reflect (349). In seeing me, the other shows me to myself, and in so doing, he might shame me. Sartre writes: “I discover [myself] in shame and, in other instances, in pride. It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other’s look and myself at the end of that look” (350). According to Sartre, shame happens when I do not like what I see in the mirror; pride happens when I do. Insofar as the other defines me, Sartre says that I am not my own. He explains: “Shame [...] is shame of self; it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object [...] I am this self which another knows” (350).

Sartre uncritically takes for granted that the mirror is accurate. To illustrate this, he tells a story of a man standing in an empty hallway bent over a keyhole of an apartment. If no one sees what he is doing, Sartre says, the man gets lost in his spying and forgets himself. But as soon as he hears footsteps in the hallway, he has the sensation of being caught. When he becomes aware of someone watching him staring into the keyhole, he becomes a Peeping-Tom. For Sartre, the other’s testimony is always accurate: “I am this being. I do not for an instant think of denying

it; my shame is a confession” (351). Shame is admitting that I am what you see, for Sartre, it is admitting that I am guilty.

Like Sartre, Anzaldúa imagines shame like a mirror: “to be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we’ll see there” (*Borderlands* 80). For Anzaldúa and Sartre, shame comes from being looked at, and in all cases, it is not exactly the other’s eyes that shame me, but my seeing myself as the other sees me. Whether I am looking through a peephole, as Sartre imagines, or about to open my mouth in the presence of another Latina, as Anzaldúa describes, I become a thing, an object for the other, and potentially “the subject of your *burla*” (80).

In Chapter 1 of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa tells the story of how her cousin Pedro ran from the *migra* but got caught and was deported to Guadalajara despite being a fifth-generation US citizen. She notes that “he tried to smile when he looked back at us, to raise his fist. But I saw the *shame* pushing his head down, I saw the terrible weight of shame hunch his shoulders” (26, my italics). Anzaldúa admits to feeling this shame when Chicanas like her get rejected by the greater society: “Yes, all you people wound us when you reject us. Rejection strips us of self-worth; our vulnerability exposes us to shame. It is our innate identity you find wanting. We are ashamed that we need your good opinion, that we need your acceptance” (110). On Anzaldúa’s reading, Chicanas experience the shame of needing the other’s approval, of placing their self-worth in the hands of the other.

Although Anzaldúa’s use of shame thus far could be considered Sartrean, what makes her analysis of shame more descriptive of Chicana experience in particular is her emphasis on the role of language in Chicana shame. In 1952, African Existentialist Franz Fanon began the project of improving upon Sartre’s description of shame by incorporating the linguistic element, which Anzaldúa continued in 1986. I now turn to a discussion of Fanon’s linguistic contribution to the philosophy of shame followed by a discussion of Anzaldúa’s concept of “linguistic terrorism.”

Part III: Fanon on Shame

Franz Fanon wrote about language shame, which connects him directly to Anzaldúa, but he also wrote about shame in general. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952), he challenged Sartre's conclusion that shame is a confession, countering it with the idea that for a Black man in a White Supremacist society, the (White) other does not "discover" him as a criminal, for example, but rather turns him into one. For a Black man, says Fanon, shame is not a confession, not an admission of guilt. A Black man's shame is generated by the kind of seeing that happens in White supremacy. For a White man to feel shame, perhaps Sartre is right that he would have to be guilty. In contrast, Fanon says that a Black man just has to be *seen* to be shamed, which makes shame an admission of impotence, not guilt. The shamed party cowers in both cases, however, which only reinforces the judgment of guilt. Fanon recalls being called out as a "Negro" on a train, and, after having initially been amused by it, felt trapped by that image:

I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity, which I had learned about from Jaspers. [...] In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. I had already stopped being amused. [...] I as responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho good eatin.'" (112)⁷

⁷ Before Fanon gave us a corrective to Sartre's phenomenology of shame, W.E.B. Du Bois gave us "double-consciousness." In *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, Du Bois described the "second-sight" that the Black man possesses, which lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is not altogether gift, for Du Bois, since he said that he has no true self-consciousness, which, in Sartrean language, might amount to "he is never his acts." Du Bois

Fanon was caught in shame, but Sartre was wrong about what his shame meant.

The first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, is titled “The Negro and Language.” Here, Fanon asks why a colonized Black man from the Antilles would strive to speak French and responds that to speak “means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (17-18). He draws out the racial dimension of linguistic difference: “the negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter,” or “more of a human being [...] in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language.” He adds, “mastery of language affords remarkable power.” “Every colonized people... every people in whose soul an *inferiority complex* has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country” (18, my italics). A sure way to colonize a people and to make them feel inferior, for Fanon, is to take away their language. This is exactly what happened:

The middle class in the Antilles never speak Creole except to their servants. In school the children of Martinique are taught to scorn the dialect. One avoids Creolisms. Some families completely forbid the use of Creole, and mothers ridicule their children from speaking it. (20)

described “always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (45). Like Fanon, Du Bois would not have believed that shame is a confession but rather a reaction to being looked at. Comparing Du Bois’s “double-consciousness” and Anzaldúa’s “Mestiza consciousness,” Martinez points out that Du Bois and Anzaldúa both name a special “gift” that arises from the experience of systemic oppression. Du Bois says that black people who suffer from double-consciousness gain a kind of “second-sight,” while Anzaldúa called “la facultad” that power of seeing which comes out of a life of linguistic and racial oppression (Martinez, “The Double-Consciousness” 168-9).

Fanon shows how the possession of a language gives you access to a world and a certain degree of power.⁸ Naturally, this causes families to begin to break down. As Fanon puts it:

[The Negro] is incarnating a new type of man that he imposes on his associates and his family. And so his old mother can no longer understand him when he talks to her about his duds, the family's crummy joint, the dump...all of it, of course, tricked out with the appropriate accent. (36-7)

The Black man's response to what Fanon diagnoses as an "inferiority complex" is to blend, fit in, dump one's family, and claw toward linguistic acceptance. After all, he says, "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains mastery of the cultural tool that language is" (38).

Whether or not Anzaldúa read Fanon, her theory of "linguistic terrorism" sounds remarkably similar to Fanon's description. Both contest Sartre's notion that shame is a confession. Most importantly, Anzaldúa's analysis gives us a new way to talk about linguistic shame that is not at bottom, indicative of guilt. When Fanon wrote about the colonized peoples of the Antilles in *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952, he claimed to be speaking for all colonized peoples, which presumably would have included Mexican-Americans in deep South Texas, whom he would have judged to be living in a US colony. The story Fanon told about Blacks speaking French is remarkably close to Anzaldúa's observation that Mexican-Americans long to speak proper English. He understood well the external reasons why the Antillean man would want to learn French: "Yes, I must take great pains with my speech, because I shall be more or less judged by it. With great contempt they will say of me 'he doesn't even know how to speak French'" (20). But Anzaldúa also keyed in on how Mexican-Americans internalize that view: "Chicanas who grew

⁸ Fanon writes: "it is understandable that the first action of the black man is a reaction, and, since the Negro is appraised in terms of the extent of his assimilation, it is also understandable why the newcomer expresses himself only in French" (36).

up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish” (*Borderlands* 80). If Fanon rightly contended that “historically, it must be understood that the Negro wants to speak French because it is the key that can open doors which were still barred to him fifty years ago,” Anzaldúa also added a personal dimension, recounting that her own mother wanted her to erase her Mexican accent (*Black Skin* 38, *Borderlands* 76). For Anzaldúa and Fanon, language is identity, so the languages one chooses to develop as well as the ones one chooses to discard reveal the life one wants to lead. Fanon wrote about Antillean men who learned English but subversively held onto their local dialect; Anzaldúa herself majored in English to “spite, to show up, the arrogant racist teachers who thought all Chicano children were dumb and dirty” (“Speaking” 165). In other words, Anzaldúa’s descriptions are like Fanon’s, but they are descriptive of an invisible people who routinely get called Mexicans.

Before expanding upon the concept of “linguistic terrorism” and *la vergüenza lingüística*, I turn to a reading of Anzaldúa in the lineage of Mexican Existentialists, for whom the Mexican suffers from similar feelings of inferiority and shame as Fanon’s colonized Black man.

Part IV: Mexican Existentialists on Shame

In his 1984 dissertation in Chicano Studies from Berkeley, Jessie Contreras traced Chicano thought of the 1960s back to Mexican ideas. He pointed out that students in the earliest Chicano Studies programs were taught Mexican Existentialist thinkers like José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Octavio Paz, Samuel Ramos, and Leopoldo Zea.⁹ Although her field was not Chicano Studies, Anzaldúa’s timing makes it likely that she, too, would have studied these thinkers (188, 198). Anzaldúa was a meticulous writer who kept her references to other thinkers to a

⁹ Contreras writes: “Ramos and Paz are important to Chicanos in that they argued that the philosopher who molded culture to fit national circumstances, rather than the one immersed in European and Anglo-American ideas, ought to acquire national eminence. For these reasons, Ramos’ *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* and Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude* became important works in many course reading lists of Chicano Studies programs” (209-10).

minimum.¹⁰ In light of this, her quoting Vasconcelos in *Borderlands* is significant.¹¹

Vasconcelos was mentor to Samuel Ramos, student of Antonio Caso and reader of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. In *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* (1934), Ramos diagnosed Mexicans with a close cousin of shame: inferiority (Contreras 94-105). If Contreras is right that Chicanos learned the history of Mexican intellectual thought, Anzaldúa would have read Ramos and Paz along with Vasconcelos, and so would have been familiar with Ramos' "*pelado*," the caricature of the poor and illiterate, yet rude Mexican, who seems to have morphed into Paz's "*pachuco*," the introverted and troubled Mexican who disguises himself in a coded language and dress.¹² Anzaldúa may even have been familiar with Emilio Uranga's concept of "*Zozobra*," which is the particularly Mexican condition of unsettledness—perhaps the Mexican correlate to Sartre's "nausea"—in which one swings from identification with the European Conquistador to identification with the Indigenous Mexican, leaving behind an emotional wake of what Carlos Sánchez names "insufficiency, groundlessness, and loss."¹³

These Mexican Existentialists focus on the negative traits of the Mexican as a product of violent colonialism and repeated degradation. Anzaldúa's "New Mestiza" shares some of these traits, like patience and humility, but she reverses course and focuses on the pride and stubbornness of the Chicana:

Los Chicanos, how patient we seem, how very patient. There is the quiet of the Indian about us. We know how to survive. When other races have given up their tongue, we've kept ours [...] *Humildes* yet proud, *quietos* yet

¹⁰ This may have been why, at the eleventh hour, Anzaldúa pulled Kierkegaard from *Borderlands/La Frontera*. See Alessandri, "Leave out 'Kierkegaard.'"

¹¹ For more comparative scholarship between Anzaldúa and Mexican thinkers, see Sánchez Prado and García.

¹² We might add here Emilio Uranga, whose description of the Mexican as suffering from *zozobra*, or an uneasiness, is an advancement of Ramos's *Peludo* and Paz's *Pachuco*.

¹³ See Carlos Sánchez, "(M)Existentialism." In *Contingency and Commitment*, Sánchez reads the philosophy of Grupo Hiperión in precisely this way, as swinging from one extreme to the other, as itself infected with *zozobra*.

wild, *nosotros los mexicanos* will walk by the crumbling askes as we go about our business. Stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable, we the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain. (*Borderlands* 85-6)

Anzaldúa's language is more inclusive than Paz's and Ramos's, and her description of *nosotros los mexicanos* more hopeful. But she also notes that before recognizing and adopting the Mestiza consciousness, Mexican-Americans are subject to the kinds of shame and humiliation that Paz and Ramos may have had in mind. Anzaldúa did not diagnose Chicano/as in the US with *inferiority*, but she did talk about their *shame*. Nowhere does this shame cut so deeply, in Anzaldúa's writing, as in her discussion of linguistic terrorism.

Part V: Anzaldúa on Shame and Pride

"How to Tame a Wild Tongue," Chapter V in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, is among the most taught, studied, and cited sections of the book. Here, Anzaldúa offers a description of the experience of being language-shamed. The chapter begins with a dentist telling Anzaldúa that her tongue is getting in the way of his success (75). She interprets him literally and metaphorically, pointing out that unbridled tongues everywhere have stood in power's way, only to be terrorized by it. On Anzaldúa's account, her tongue's refusal to speak only English or Spanish presented a threat to people in power who believed in language purity. Her teachers hit her for speaking Spanish and her mother pleaded with her to lose her Spanish accent when speaking English (75-6). She writes about the speech class she was required to take at Pan-American College, mandatory for students with Mexican-sounding last names (*Borderlands* 54; Johnson and Cole 29). Researchers have confirmed not only that Speech 113x was mandatory for Mexicans, but also that it met five days a week over two semesters and was required for graduation (Johnson and Cole).

In addition to fulfilling the traditional course requirements, Anzaldúa claims that academic success for the Chicana involved learning to obey the "reglas de academia,"

which are implicit linguistic and behavioral rules. In a public lecture at Anzaldúa's undergraduate Alma Mater I have imagined these to include:

1. Arrive on time.
2. Spell correctly.
3. Address superiors in a professional way (Doctor, Professor are both ok; "Miss" is not).
4. Don't split your infinitives.
5. Don't just send an attachment as an email. You must write things in the body of the email too.
6. Learn how to use commas, semicolons, periods, and paragraphs.
7. If you want a recommendation, go see your professor during office hours to ask them; don't do it by email.
8. Turn assignments in on time.
9. Don't ask for extensions. Teachers will think you are lying.
10. Don't say "my car broke down," or "my Grandmother died." Teachers will call these "excuses," and say that they have heard them all. (Alessandri 2017)

Some of these rules are what academics think of as common-sense, but to a first-generation college student, or first-generation in the US, perhaps not. In this context, these rules reveal a culture of suspicion that borders on racism. Linguistic *reglas*, in particular, preoccupy Anzaldúa in *Borderlands*, and she spends the rest of the chapter defending Chicano Spanish.

In justifying her language, Anzaldúa was also justifying the existence of the Mexican-American of Deep South Texas, as Fanon did with the colonized Black man. "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity" is Anzaldúa's equivalent to Fanon's claim that to speak "means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (*Borderlands* 81; *Black Skin*

17-18).¹⁴ *La vergüenza lingüística* is the effect of linguistic terrorism on hundreds of thousands of people in the Rio Grande Valley and Latinx all over the country. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa writes:

Pena. Shame. Low estimation of self. In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives. Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure. Their language was not outlawed in their countries. They had a whole lifetime of being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was a first language, taught in school, heard of radio and TV, and read in the newspaper. (80)

In this passage, Anzaldúa is referring to speaking Spanish among Chicanas and Latinas, who, in her experience, fight for top spot among minorities.¹⁵ The Chicana who speaks no Spanish would not want the Chicana who speaks Spanish fluently to see her, because it would provoke her shame.

Anzaldúa worked to convert her linguistic shame into pride, taking solace in poetry: “when I saw poetry written in Tex-Mex for the first time, a feeling of pure joy flashed through me. I felt like we really existed as a people” (82). For Anzaldúa, as for Sartre, pride means being seen in the light that I choose. But unlike Sartre, Anzaldúa ties pride to legitimacy and freedom, both of which come from the legitimacy of her language. Pride, for Anzaldúa, consists of seeing herself represented in language, untranslated. To be a Chicana without shame means having the freedom to code-switch and to write bilingually: “until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (81). She adds: “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I

¹⁴ In “If Black English Ain’t a Language, Tell Me What Is,” James Baldwin likewise observed that “[language] reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger public, or communal identity” (Baldwin).

¹⁵ Anzaldúa writes: “If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me” (*Borderlands* 80).

will overcome the tradition of silence” (81). Like her description of shame, Anzaldúa’s description of pride is revelatory of the struggles of Chicanas in the US.

Conclusion

This essay is meant to have persuaded readers that in order to understand how shame works for Chicanas in the US, as well as how to convert it into pride, we need to read Anzaldúa in addition to Sartre, Fanon, and Ramos. Despite her resonances with Sartre, Anzaldúa is much closer to Fanon’s description of the Black man’s shame than she is to Sartre’s Peeping Tom. Her experience of shame results not from something she has done, but who she is. Anzaldúa *is* a Mexican-American like Fanon *is* a Black man. If Sartre’s character becomes a Peeping Tom by getting caught peeping, Fanon and Anzaldúa become Black and Brown just by being. Peeping Tom had a choice not to peep; Fanon and Anzaldúa did not have that choice.

Anzaldúa’s Existentialism connects at least three better-recognized branches: the European branch that includes Kierkegaard and Sartre, the Africana branch that includes Du Bois, Fanon and Baldwin, and the Mexican branch that includes Vasconcelos, Ramos and Paz. Many figures in this sub-discipline have been reluctant to accept the title “Existentialist,” and perhaps Anzaldúa would have challenged this definition too. But reading her as part of these lineages shows how Chicana Existentialism constitutes a distinct variety of Existentialism that converses with its European, Mexican, and Africana counterparts. So far, Mexican and Africana Existentialisms have added variety, complexity, and correction to the European canon. In time, Chicana Existentialism will also be recognized as adding unique perspectives on questions concerning the suffering and liberation of Hispanic women. These readings of Anzaldúa as an Existentialist philosopher have constituted one step in the process of developing Chicana Existentialism.

The research I have begun here can be continued in at least three ways: 1) Historical: Anzaldúa scholars might track down the historical connections between Anzaldúa and the major figures in European, Mexican, and Africana Existentialisms. This would involve scouring Anzaldúa’s archives at the Nettie Lee

Benson Library at UT Austin. 2) Philosophical: Anzaldúa scholars might develop the field of Chicana Existentialism. This would involve reading the work of Anzaldúa and other Chicana intellectuals to highlight and develop the Existentialist themes found therein. 3) Comparative: Anzaldúa scholars would benefit from a more extensive comparison of her ideas to those offered by the Africana Existentialist tradition, especially their analyses of lived experience as nonwhites living in the US.

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers." *This Bridge Called My Back*. Edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga. 2nd edition. New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 165-6.
- . *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4th edition. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2012.
- . *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. Edited by Ana Louise Keating. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Alessandri, Mariana. "Educated but not *Educado*." UTRGV Philosophy Club. Edinburg. 2 May 2017. Lecture.
- . "Leave out 'Kierkegaard': Reading Gloria Anzaldúa Reading Kierkegaard." *El Mundo Zurdo* 7. Edited by Sara A. Ramírez, Larissa M. Mercado-López, and Sonia Saldivar-Hull. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, forthcoming.
- . "Becoming Faithful: Reading Gloria Anzaldúa Reading Kierkegaard." *Taking Kierkegaard Personally: First Person Responses*. Edited by Gordon Marino and Jamie Lorentzen. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, forthcoming.
- Baldwin, James. "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" *New York Times*, 29 July 1979.
- Carranza, Elihu. *Chicanismo: Philosophical Fragments*. DuBuque, IO: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1978.
- Contreras, Jessie. "Existential Phenomenology and its influence on Mexican and Chicano Philosophy and Philosophy of Education." 1984. UC Berkeley, PhD dissertation.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1995.

- Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- Garcia, Richard A. "Toward a Theory of Latina Rebirth 'Renacimiento De La Tierra Madre:' The Feminism of Gloria Anzaldua." *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1997, pp. 29–44.
- Gordon, Lewis. Introduction. *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*. Edited by Lewis Gordon. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Johnson, Rob, and Deborah Cole. "'How to Tame a Wild Tongue': Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera and the 1960's Era Speech Test and Speech Classes at Pan-American University." *El Mundo Zurdo 4*. Edited by T. Jackie Cuevas, Larissa M. Mercado-López, and Sonia Saldívar-Hull. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2015, 23-38.
- Martinez, Jacqueline M. *Phenomenology of Chicana Experience and Identity: Communication and Transformation in Praxis*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.
- . "Culture, Communication, and Latina Feminist Philosophy: Toward a Critical Phenomenology of Culture." *Hypatia*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2013, pp. 221-36.
- . "The Double-Consciousness of Du Bois & The "Mestiza Consciousness" of Anzaldúa" in *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2002, pp. 158-76.
- Newton, Margaret, and Rebekah Sinclair. "Haunting Ourselves: Lugones, Ortega, and a New (Old) model for the Multiplicitous Self." Unpublished manuscript.
- Ortega, Mariana. *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*. New York: SUNY Press, 2016.
- Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. New York: Grove Press, 1994.
- Ramos, Samuel. *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*. Translated by Peter G. Earle, Texas Pan American, 1969.
- Reuman, Ann E. "Coming into Play: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa." *MELUS*, vol. 25, no. 2, June 2000, pp. 3–45.
- Sánchez, Carlos Alberto. *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy*. New York: SUNY Press, 2016.

- . "(M)Existentialism." *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 3 March 2019, <http://www.philosophersmag.com/essays/197-m-existentialism>
- Sánchez Prado, Ignacio M. "The Return of the Decolonized: The Legacies of Leopoldo Zea's Philosophy of History for Comparative American Studies." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2009, pp. 274–294.
- Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1956.
- . "No Exit." *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. New York: Vintage International, 1989.
- Sithole, Tendayi. "Frantz Fanon: Africana Existentialist Philosopher." *African Identities*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2016, pp. 177-90.