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## **Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands*: Pathway to a Pluralized Persona**

*By Christine Cloud*

*Borderlands* functions as Gloria Anzaldua's path to a new type of self that, although largely based on her own personal experiences, is neither singular nor dual but rather collective. Thus the text is at once a journey to a reclaimed space of liberated identity and a textual platform on which to rewrite Chicano/a history. Anzaldua's text can and should be read as a form of auto-ethnographical writing because it relates the story of an entire community as well as that of an individual—as is the case with the earlier Chicano autobiographies. More specifically, *Borderlands* represents a self-conscious attempt to construct and theorize a type of post-modern multiple, mutable, and multifaceted collective self, which is called the new *mestiza*. It exists simultaneously within a variety of communities rather than within one ethnic community, and so, it is representative of a new type of auto-ethnography.

The post-modern, post-colonial ethnography consciously highlights the “multiple shifting identities, which characterize our lives” (Reed-Dehaney 4). It provides members of the Chicano/a community—including women and homosexuals—with the means to reject and transcend the identity offered in the first wave of Chicano ethnic autobiographical writing and the Rodriguez model of ethnic autobiography. Thus, within Anzaldua's text, there is the quest for a true self and identity that was the initial desire of many writers involved in the Chicano movement has given way to the realization that “there is no fixed identity” and that “the ethnic I is composed of layers” (Amayo 114).

Before continuing on with Anzaldua's book, a little background information is needed. After the United States-Mexico War of 1848, the United States added a vast territory to its possessions and an entire new people that—as were now without a land, without a country, without a voice—shared a common fate of racial, political and economic oppression within the New American civil framework. To gain some sort of ethnic autonomy and realize their desire for guaranteed civil rights and improved economic opportunities, members of the Southwestern Mexican-American community began to mobilize in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Calling themselves Chicanos and separating themselves from both Americans and Mexicans, the members of this community began to demand the right to exist as a separate ethnic community with their own communal land (Chabram 229). Crucial to the success of the Chicano political movement was the creation of some sort of group identity that was distinct from that of both Mexicans and Americans.

Chicanos found this identity by privileging one particular component of their ethnic heritage over all others. Representing themselves as direct descendents of the Aztecs and as such the rightful heirs to Aztlan—the mythical Aztec homeland located within the Southwestern United States—Chicanos constructed for themselves a new ethnic identity (Padilla 115). That this identity was based on the assumption of a pure and unfiltered Aztec heritage is an indication that in the mind of the Chicano, “[W]orldview, values, traditions, culture and philosophy were considered recoupable in some pure form and applicable to the lived experience of the present” (Neate 117). And in so far as it was perceived to be capable of embodying pure and natural Aztec values, for its members, Chicano/a culture was viewed as capable of resisting the corrupt “Anglo” capitalist society of the United States.

As it was hoped that it would ultimately serve as the banner under which the members of their community could mobilize, this newly created ethnic identity was presented as one that was somehow inherently timeless and unchanging. Because it allowed for this type of presentation, the ethnic autobiography played a very important role in both the construction and promulgation of a new Chicano identity. It is for this reason that there are so many examples of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical texts within the history of Chicano narrative, among them Jose Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho*, Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory*, and Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and the *Revolt of the Cockroach People*, which attempt to both create and then sustain the notion of an essential and stable Chicano self (Neate 117).

Selecting and inventing from the materials submitted to them by dominant and metropolitan culture (Pratt 6), Chicano political and spiritual leaders, such as Acosta, Villarreal, and Rodriguez, used the Western genre of the autobiography in order to tell the story of their struggle for self-realization and autonomy within an ethnocentric and racist society. However, for these Chicano ethnic autobiographers, the relation of one’s involvement within a political movement represented much more than simply the relation of their personal struggles against racism and ethnocentrism. Serving as a backdrop for the search for a self—an essential ethnic self—for these authors, the struggle for autonomy as told in the ethnic autobiography represented the site on which the author’s identity was first renegotiated and then later ultimately redefined. By defining themselves as autonomous selves rather than simply the other within their autobiographies, Chicano writers found a means by which to gain access to the very subjectivity that they had always been denied. Thus, for them, the writing of an autobiography—a form of writing that had for so long been used to uphold the supposed superiority of those within the

center—“becomes a means of reforming (or de-forming) the former ‘empire’ and its enforced symbolic interactions” (Smith and Watson 37).

In their ethnic autobiographies, Chicano writers relate the way in which their particular struggles against dominant Western culture resulted in their discovery of their true ethnic identity. Their particular form of life writing is in many ways characteristic of typical Western autobiographical writing, given that the end result of their entrance into the autobiographical project is the materialization of the a priori essence that constitutes their real self. However, the fact that the self that is materialized is one that represents a collective body rather than an isolated individual makes their foray into the world of life writing distinct from that of the majority of autobiographers, who generally “divorce the life trajectory from the social context in which it occurs” (Reed-Dehaney 5).

For those community members whose racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual differences prevented them from being accepted into mainstream American society, however, achieving Rodriguez’s vision was impossible. They also were not able to look inward and construct themselves with the identity purported by the first wave of Chicano writers. That was so because they were marginalized within their own communities as well as within American society. Therefore, for these subjects of “difference” within the Chicano community—such as the triply marginalized Anzaldua—the journey toward self-realization would have to follow another path: that of the new *mestiza*. It’s a trail that, paradoxically, would be grounded upon the many differences that exist within said community while at the same time branch beyond the dualities of both Chicano nationalism and Americanization in order to lead to a new type of self. This new self would be post-modern and post-colonial, “pluralist, multidimensional and multifaceted” and thus fully capable of functioning within “pluralist, late industrialist, late twentieth century society” (Bergland 133).

Anzaldua begins her *Borderlands* by describing the history of the Chicano people, which according to her—and other Chicano ethnic autobiographers—begins with the Aztec migration through Aztlan, “land of the herons ... the Edenic place of origin of the Azteca,” and crosses through Mexico, where the indigenous “peoples mixed and became the mestizo ... a new hybrid race” (26). Eventually, as a result of *el retorno*—the migration of the Mexican people back to their original homeland to the North—the migration ends up in the American Southwest, where it continues to change and develop over time. *Borderlands* represents a counter history. Within its relation of the Chicano history, it highlights the vastly unequal relationship between the “Gringos” and the “Chicanos,” and the oppression that this continually forced upon the latter

group. More specifically, it is a type of unofficial history of the United State's seizure of more than half of Mexico's territory and the suffering that this act of robbery caused among the area's inhabitants.

As with other Chicano ethnic autobiographers, Anzaldua places her own life squarely within this history of oppression and struggle. Although it took place more than 150 years ago, Anzaldua uses the first person when talking about the effects of the United State's possession of Mexico's Northwest territories. According to her, when the "Gringo seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it ... fuimos desuñados, destraneados destipados ... we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed and separated from our identity and our history" (29). With the use of this first person "we" to describe the tragedy of the 1848 United States-Mexico War and the far-reaching effects that it had on the people who lived within the newly incorporated areas of the United States, Anzaldua draws a bridge between the Mexicans of the past and the Chicanos/as of the future. From this bridge, she connects all of their subjectivities and builds a collective Chicano/a identity, one that spans across vast chronological distances to construct a shared history and identity among the people of the Borderlands.

Anzaldua's involvement in constructing a shared history and community among her people based solely upon their common ethnic heritage in *Borderlands* at first seems to be very much like the ethnic autobiographies of other Chicano authors. However, the vast majority of predecessors were male. Her presentation of the story of her people is an account that is both unofficial and even subversive because *Borderlands* attempts to tell the story of the continual marginalization—within and outside of the Chicano/a community—of that which is feminine or different. This holds true within mainstream America as well as within the Chicano community. In reality, Anzaldua "elaborates a counter-mythology" (Smith 201) that corrects the historical accounts told by previous Chicano auto-ethnographers. It then makes room for the re-evaluation and ultimate re-valorization of the indigenous woman as well as her descendent, the Chicana, within the Chicano community.

Thus, through her retelling of events, the *a*—which in the Spanish language serves as the feminine marker of identity—is placed back into the collective story of the Chicano/a people. Because of this, *Borderlands* represents a critical reworking of the masculine Chicano ethnic autobiography. It is now one which retells the history of the Chicano/a people to give attention to the "ex-centric—as both off-centered and de-centered—," that is to say the Chicanas, the homosexuals and any other figure marginalized within the Chicano/a community. And so, it

allows for “margins and edges to gain new value” both within said community as well as within the rest of American society (Hutcheon 130).

Within the pages of *Borderlands*, Anzaldua discusses how the Aztecs conquered the many other indigenous communities of the American southwest and then proceeded to replace their gender parallel societies with one that was completely patriarchal. Anzaldua demonstrates the manner in which the female voice was silenced within the Aztec community by pointing out that the masculine Gods of the Aztecs subsumed female deities of the original inhabitants. As a result of suppression of the feminine—first within Aztec and subsequently Chicano/a culture—within the Chicano/a community notions of selfhood—be they collective or individual—came to be formulated unequivocally with masculine ideals. However, in *Borderlands* it is not just the Aztec component of the Chicano/a society, which is exposed as being based upon patriarchal ideals of selfhood. Within her text, Anzaldua gives evidence that, although Chicano leaders tried to privilege their Aztec lineage over all others, they were unable to prevent some aspects of their Spanish and Mexican heritage from seeping into their collective identity. And because the societies of Spain and Mexico were also quite patriarchal in nature, with this seepage came even more masculinized models of subjectivity. These models—because they reflected the idea of the woman as being nothing more than man’s negative other—left no room for an independent Chicana subjectivity (Rebolledo 98).

According to Anzaldua, all of these patriarchal models of identity became so infused within Chicano culture that as women, it became impossible for Chicanas to find a self, one that would be empowering instead of powerless, within their community. What is more, in the predominantly heterosexual community of the Chicano/a people, if one were homosexual—as was the case with Anzaldua herself—a form of selfhood that was liberating instead of limiting was even more difficult to conceive of, let alone discover. Certainly, it could not be found by reading the masculine versions of the Chicano/a collective story and by comporting oneself in the manner that they proscribed. After all, given that these versions are based upon the privileging of an Aztec identity and Aztec society was patriarchal (i.e., the masculine was privileged over the feminine), the collective self constructed in the Chicano ethnic autobiography was a strictly “male-oriented identity” (Neatre 20). What is more, Chicanos allowed many Catholic religious traditions, including those relating to the Mary/Eve dichotomy to seep into their new identity. Therefore, the collective Chicano self posited by the ethnic autobiographers was a masculine one, one that promoted feminine stereotypes and closed the door to an autonomous and empowering Chicana sense of self.

Thus for Anzaldua and other Chicana writers, the discovery of a self had to come through one's need of leaving the community, not modeling oneself after the identity prescriptions promulgated in the masculine ethnic autobiographies. According to her, it is only through distance that one could begin to view her community—and her place within it—with new eyes and find a way to maintain her ethnic identity and still maintain her right to refuse subjugation within her own community. By stressing this need, Anzaldua quite effectively demonstrates that Chicano nationalism failed to perceive the multiplicity and discontinuity evident in the histories and geographies it sought to encompass within Aztlan. And so, she shows how “Aztlan as a place, or even as a unifying symbol or image erases the vast differences that form the richness and variety in the term Chicano” (Perez-Torres 93), instead of providing Chicano/as with multiple possibilities of identification.

As she states many times within *Borderlands*, it was exceedingly difficult for Anzaldua to leave her community. So difficult, in fact, she does not at all know where she found the strength to leave: “To this day I'm not at all sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, mi tierra, mi gente, and all that picture stood for” (38). However, despite this daunting prospect, for Anzaldua it would have been far more difficult to stay and remain a victim of her community's oppression of women as well as other internally ex-centered figures. People like her were not approved of, and because they were different—or in her words possessed of the “Shadow-Beast” within—(Anzaldua 4) would never be able to reach self-actualization within the confines of the Chicano community. Thus, unlike Acosta who returns home in order to find himself and discover his Chicano identity, because of her differences or her otherness—specifically her femaleness and her homosexuality— Anzaldua said, “I had to leave home so that I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that has been imposed on me” (38).

However, although she leaves her community and begins to speak and write within the non-Hispanic American community, unlike Rodriguez, she does not “lose touch with [her] origins,” because as she states quite unequivocally, “lo mexicano is in my system, I am a turtle, where I go I carry 'home' on my back” (43). Nor does she ever attempt to erase the markers of her ethnic identity or even to separate her private Chicana life from her public American one. On the contrary, she openly and emphatically announces her Chicano/a heritage. Her announcement of identity in of itself comes to be seen as a sort of political statement, one which gives testimony to the oppression which her people have been forced to suffer as a result of their subjugated position within the surrounding American society and to the oppression that the

Chicana—especially the lesbian Chicana—has been forced to contend within her own community as well as the rest of society.

However, although she gives testimony to the plight of her people—especially to the many Chicanas who have suffered and continue to suffer from the corrosive effects of day-to-day oppression and victimization—Anzaldua does not present herself as Chicana only. On the contrary, instead of rejecting her European and American ancestry, Anzaldua embraces both of these aspects of her identity. She refuses to negate either one but rather insists on her ability to be both at the same time. As is made apparent in *Borderlands* and within the following quotation from an interview in which she describes her reasons for writing this particular text, Anzaldua said, “Both of these traditions are inherent in me. I cannot disown the white tradition, the Euro-American tradition, any more than I can disown the Mexican, the Latino or the Native, because they are all in me” (qtd. in Lunsford 52).

From the above passage, it can be seen that Anzaldua does not just present herself as being strictly Mexican, American, or Latina but rather a combination of them all. What is more, within *Borderlands* she declares that not only is she a combination of these particular cultures, but is representative of a subject located within “all cultures at the same time” (Anzaldua 99). As a member of a variety of different cultures, she speaks not one, not two but rather a variety of different languages, among them Spanish, English, Tejano, Chicano and Pachuco. When you take Anzaldua’s movements between different social classes both within and outside of her group into account, the number of these languages even further multiplies to where she now speaks Working Class and Slang English, Standard and Slang Spanish (77).

Thus, as is evidenced by Anzaldua’s location within different cultural communities and her ability to speak a variety of different languages within *Borderlands*: “[D]ouble identity and insider/outsider are constructs too simplistic for an adequate understanding of the processes of representation and power” (4). The self constructed in Anzaldua’s text is one that is different from that of the first wave of Chicano ethnic autobiographers, because it acknowledges the failure of identity to articulate the multiplicity that characterizes modern existence. These autobiographers “construed of Chicano/a identity as being essential and fixed rather than temporal and mutable, prioritizing descent over consent in their formulation of community (Neate 225). For Anzaldua, it is important that the members of her community embrace the multiple and mutable identity that she espouses. That is because, according to her, “[T]he future of Chicano culture depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures.” (Anzaldua 80).

Anzaldua also insists on her ability to inhabit both genders and to be possessed of more than one specific type of sexuality. In this way, she is not man nor woman nor homosexual nor straight, but rather “*mita y mita*” (half and half) or “two in one body, both male and female: the coming together of opposites within” (Anzaldua 41). And for Anzaldua, occupying this space between genders and sexualities is both compelling and liberating because it offers freedom from an “absolute despot duality that says that we are able to be only one or the other” (Anzaldua 41). She does not just ascribe this ability to herself, but rather emphasizes that we are all really *mita y mita*. Western culture has forced us to see ourselves as one or the other, however, because of its desire to promote the dominance of males over females and heterosexuals over homosexuals.

Because of her simultaneous occupation of different subject positions, within *Borderlands* it is impossible to fix Anzaldua within a given identity, be it ethnic, gendered, or sexual. She is at once Mexican, American, Chicana, Anglo, white, brown, male and female. As such, Anzaldua represents a new form of identity, of being someone in the late-modern world, which she defines as the new *mestiza*. Because it is a product of the transfer of cultural and spiritual values of one group to another ... “like the goddess Coatlicue who according to Anzaldua is the symbol ambiguity and change, rather than being fixed or stable the identity of the new *mestiza* is a ‘protean’ one which is in a “state of perpetual transition” (87). As an identity which is inherently “unfixable” within a given category of identity but rather moves between them all, the new *mestiza* exemplifies the fact that concerning identity “at the turn of the century, everything is up for grabs: categories are disrupted, and the borders between them are permeable ... transparent and crossable” (qtd. in Lunsford, 61).

Because of its location between the spaces of ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, according to Anzaldua, the new “*mestiza* consciousness can further the development of Chicano ethnicity and avoid the binaries of Western culture” (Anzaldua 77). Thus, in constructing her new *mestiza* identity, Anzaldua makes readily apparent the fact that the subject’s different and often contradictory affiliations—be they political, ethnic, religious, cultural, or sexual—prevent the formation of a cohesive identity and provide for the contradiction of a dislocated subject (Torres 279). For those who have ever had to live in a state of marginalization, the new *mestiza* identity is one that is as empowering as it is revolutionary, since it is hard to oppress one existing in the spaces between race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. Through her creation of a new form of Chicano/a subjectivity, one which “emerges from a subjectivity structured by multiple determinants—gender, class, sexuality, and contradictory membership in competing cultural and racial identities,” Anzaldua replaces essentialist notions of Chicano/a identity with a “new,

shifting subjectivity capable of re-configuring and re-centering itself, depending on the forms of oppression to be confronted” (Yarbro-Bejarono 11). So, she finds a way to contest the discourses that have fixed her in the past as “Mexican,” “brown,” “woman,” and/or “gay,” and then proceeded to marginalize her because of her location within all of these categories of identity.

Therefore, due to its lack of fixity, the new *mestiza* identity offers Anzaldua numerous possibilities for both power and resistance. However, these possibilities are not to be enjoyed by Anzaldua alone. After all, as she states within *Borderlands*, although the exploration of her personal self through writing enabled her to accept all aspects of her identity and to “eject herself out as Nahual, an agent of her own transformation” (96), she does not just write in order to “modify and shape” Gloria Anzaldua but also to find within herself the “primordial energy” needed to be “able to change herself and others” (96). Within *Borderlands*, Anzaldua attempts to bring about the transformation of all the members of her community, in fact for all the members of the world community—be they Catholic, Protestant, male, female, white, brown, gay, or straight—who have ever felt themselves victims of oppression and marginalization. For them, the new *mestiza* identity, and the many possibilities that its openness provides, is to be embraced collectively. This collectivity is not only joined together by a common ethnic heritage but by the shared desire to reject singularity, embrace multiplicity and discover an empowering new way of being in the post-modern world. So, rather than an ethnic autobiography of the Chicano/a people, *Borderlands* is an auto-ethnography of a new breed of people. The new *mestizas*, who, like Anzaldua, exist simultaneously in a variety of different of social groupings, are united in their “tolerance for contradictions, and tolerance for ambiguity” (79).

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