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Mestiza Consciousness and Dialect(ic)s:
Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera: the New Mestiza*

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"So I think that this is what the theories of the minor are in the process of doing: looking at the theories of the major and seeing what they can learn and use, without being subverted or assimilated by the major, without being swallowed."¹

Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa
Santa Cruz, California
May, 1989

I. Introduction: Experience, Writing, Theory

From its very first appearance on the scene of Chicano/a literary discourse, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) has struck its readers and reviewers for the way the author mixes genres, makes ample use of Spanish, employs an 'elliptical' style of exposition, and generally disturbs norms of textual cohesion and coherence. Describing *Borderlands* as a text composed from a variety of cultural codes, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz also warns of the "readerly" difficulties awaiting a reader expecting a straightforward autobiography:

[*Borderlands*]...interweaves theory and visceral tale, prose and poetry, history, anthropology, psychology, literature, personal and collective experience. The experiment is sometimes a smashing success...And sometimes the stretch toward absolute theory falls short. (62)²

The attention Kantrowitz draws to the stretch toward what she calls absolute theory is also a warning to the reader that *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* will not be able to be contained within the genre of autobiogray, and that

moreover, its stretch into the genre of critical theory, the genre it wants to spill over into, is not likely to satisfy the full demands of that genre. Eleanor J. Baden (1988), writing for *Belles Lettres*, also points to the readerly difficulties the code-switching engenders:

The terrain is not easy going; her language, merging English, Castilian Spanish, Tex-Mex, a north Mexican dialect, and Nahuatl, is sometimes difficult to follow. Nonetheless, it reflects what she calls 'the language of the Borderlands.' As such, it is her offering to those from the mainland, a political statement that shakes us from linguistic complacency. (13)

Readers coming to the text of *Borderlands* with English only will thus have their linguistic patience tried. The attention drawn here to the linguistic complacency of the mainland provides a sure fire signal that *Borderlands* enters the scene of Anglo American letters and criticism in multicultural times and the politics they engender in contemporary America. In a review for *Third Woman*, Cherríe Moraga (1989:151) takes takes displeasure at Anzaldúa's tendency to leave points unstated or undeveloped, i.e., her elliptical style of exposition. Throughout the review Moraga hold Anzaldúa to strong requirements of essay unity and coherence. In discussing chapter four of *Borderlands*, "La herencia de Coatlicue", Moraga complains that the text, "...disorients, jumping around from anecdote to philosophy to history to *sueño*, seldom developing a single topic."

While these reviewers warn of the readerly difficulties attending *Borderlands/La Frontera*, they also point to its energy, passion, and innovative character. Kaye/Kantrowitz (1988: 62), for instance, concedes that: "Given the scope of the material and the boldness of Anzaldúa's reach, it seems churlish to ask for a smooth product." And in a similar vein, Baden (1988:13) praises *Borderlands/La Frontera* for the literary ground it clears, saying of the text that it is, "...a step toward legitimacy...hopeful, confident even, that change will come." And despite the reservations about

Anzaldúa's elliptical style, Moraga (1989:156) is able to praise *Borderlands/La Frontera* for the way the text brings life and writing together, concluding that "the best of the writing wroughts out a vision from a suffering which Anzaldúa does not objectify, but lives." With this critical appraisal, Moraga combines in one sentence the three terms that orient my own reading of *Borderlands*: experience, writing, theory. These three terms, my reading maintains, encapsulate the issues of narrative authority surrounding the composition of *Borderlands*.

Far more disturbing to the Academy than its generic breaches, I offer as a hypothesis, is the unabashed way Anzaldúa appeals to the authority of her personal experience to justify the dialectical points of her text. By itself the breach of generic contract seems insufficient to hold for very long the attention of the Anglo American literary and critical Academy. After all, in *Theory of Literature* (1942:234-5) Rene and Wellek had already observed and theorized the compositional process for modern genre theory: "Modern genre theory," they assert, "is clearly, descriptive. It doesn't limit the number of possible kinds and doesn't prescribe to authors. It supposes that traditional kinds may be 'mixed' and produce a new kind." Thus, what disturbs the Academy more than Anzaldúa's breach of generic contracts is the way the composition of *Borderlands* challenges the prescription that a valid critical discourse should not be buttressed with the authority of personal experience but on the authority of the Western *logos*: rational argument that obeys the laws of identity and non-contradition, proceeding step by step by inductive and/or deductive paths. To appeal to the authority of personal experience disconcerts the Academy because such appeals evoke all the dangers of subjectivity. Only the parameters of the *logos* can keep a writer safe from the dangers of subjectivity, e.g., the dangers that stem from assuming that individual experience can generalize over a class of individuals, that the voice of

one individual can represent that of another, or riskier yet, that personal experience will become a reified site of unconstestable insight. The safeguards from subjectivity are secured from the *logos* through a rigid observance of the Western laws of thought: identity, non-contradiction, and the excluded middle. As represented in *Borderlands*, the dialectics of *Mestiza* consciousness contest the promise of security offered by the Western prescription that a term, proposition, or state of affairs must be either true or false, that it cannot be both simultaneously, or that once it holds one value it cannot carry the other. Here, it is worth noting that the premise of the challenge is not that identity and non-contradiction are not useful but that they are too narrow to account for the diversity and heterogeneity of human life experience. From such a point of view, the Western *logos* is not so much a constitutive principle of human life and consciousness as it is an imposition, the regulative effects of Western prescriptive ideology.

But Anzaldúa's challenge to the Western *logos* on the basis of her personal experience extends further, for it also questions the assumption that writer can keep out the authority of personal experience from the actual production of a critical text. In effect, the challenge Anzaldúa issues to the Western Academy calls into question the state of affairs in which it is assumed that only rarely, if ever, does a writer of Academic critical theory succumb to the pressure to rely on the authority of personal experience to make a valid dialectical point. In fact, from the standpoint of Anzaldúa's challenge, the unmarked state characterizing the relationship of lived to written life would be one where the one continually 'contaminates' the other. Were the reversal of the unmarked state to hold, the assumption that the Academic critical text takes its authority from the Western *logos* rather than individual *empireia* is brought into problematic relief. The text of *Borderlands* throws a problematic light on the *logos/empireia* dichotomy because its

mode of composition--the thematic gaps, the style-shifting, and genre-mixing--implicitly and dialectially pose the question as to whether writers of Academic critical theory do not accept a less rigorous point of departure by never seriously putting into question the prescriptions of compositional form and whether Western logical forms are really seamless. As Moraga observes, Anzaldúa does not succumb easily to the Western assumption that life is one thing and logic still another; rather, she resists the dichotomy as she strives to write a critical vision of life that is close to the bone of her personal experience. In this way not only does Anzaldúa put into practice her policy of borrowing from the "majors" whatever she finds useful to write her critical vision of life, but she also in the same social act of writing resists the assimilative tendencies of High Academic theory. This implies that the resistance to being "swallowed" is at the root of why *Borderlands* takes the compositional path it does.

And not just to issue a shrill challenge to an elitist vision of Western reason does Anzaldúa risk all the dangers of subjectivity in the composition of *Borderlands*. As the composing process puts *Borderlands* at great risk from the dangers of subjectivity, it also has the effect of placing the text in an arena where the dangers of objectivity can also be exposed. In our times, the dangers inherent in the latter have not been more dramatically posed and exposed than in the life of Paul De Man. If his early War time anti-Semitic writings can be described as "youthful indiscretions" or "biodegradables", then it is equally true that De Man's rigorous use of the Liberal Arts trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic to perform his critical deconstructions offers a picture of the personal interests and life experience fueling his deconstructive trivium (Derrida, 1989:812-873). The reader of his oeuvre can legitimately wonder what traces of personal history drove his interest to constantly fan the flame of the rhetorical power

of language in order to distinguish its referential opacities and thus the authority of Western philosophical discourse. Perhaps the reasons the reviewers have been so simultaneously dissatisfied and fascinated with *Borderlands* is due to the way the its composition has the simultaneous effect of risking the dangers of subjectivity as well as raising the dangers of objectivity.

Situated thus, amidst the dangers of subjectivity and objectivity, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* participates in the current crisis of legitimation pervading the cultural institutions of the "most highly developed societies", as Jean François Lyotard puts it in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984:xxv). The handy definition of the postmodern condition he offers--"Incredulity toward metanarratives (xxiv)" succinctly summarizes the crisis of authority pervading Western societies. A contemporary Chicana/o literary text such as *Borderlands/La Frontera* is part of an emerging postmodern literary discourse formation that exemplifies the political potential inherent in postmodernism. By daring to make her autobiography into a form of aphoristic philosophy, and by daring to do so without the 'proper' credentials, Anzaldúa practices her narrative art in a way that echoes Lyotard's assessment of postmodern knowledge and authority:

Postmodern knowledge is not only simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to difference and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology but the inventor's paralogy. (xxv)

Lyotard's assessment of postmodern knowledge helps to explain why Anzaldúa chooses to compose a text that will not conform to the canons of Western composition. His assessment of postmodern knowledge at its source is a fitting description of Anzaldúa's efforts to retrieve Chicano/a history and culture from the oblivion to which Anglo American society historically relegates it. The relevant principle of

composition being the inventor's paralogy, a Greek term which denotes that which is beyond all calculation, and even a miscalculation, no wonder *Borderlands* contributes to a postmodern narrative aesthetics that take their currency from metonymy and discontinuity, absence and contradiction. But if *Borderlands* is a species of postmodern narrative knowledge, of what does it give its reader knowledge? In the rest of this essay I maintain that *Borderlands/La Frontera* offers to the linguistic mainland in one fragment of autobiography a form of dialectics that could be said to be indigenous to the Chicana borderlands: *Mestiza* consciousness.

II. Dialect(ic)s on the Border, *Mestiza* Style

Evidence that Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* cannot be a simple species of autobiography but that its composition gives it the flavor of an aphoristic critical philosophy stems from the way *mestiza* consciousness seizes upon the subject-object dichotomy, a staple of Western philosophy, in order to expose its limitations. In its aim and scope *mestiza* consciousness expresses a form of dialectics that has a historical link with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. Speaking of the role of dialectics in society, for instance, Herbert Marcuse (1989:276) does not hesitate to assign to dialectical thinking a global scope and a precise aim: "We are dealing," he states, "with the dialectics of liberation ... and not only liberation in an intellectual sense, but liberation involving the mind and the body, liberation involving entire human existence." In the tradition of Critical Theory, *Borderlands* also aims for the liberation of the human body and consciousness from the grips of repressive ideology. And like Critical Theory, *Borderlands* also invests heavily in the political force of the the social act of writing. Marcuse's assessment of the United States educational system is pertinent more than ever when he states (286): "The educational system is political, so it is not we who want to

politicize the educational system. What we want is a counterpolicy against the established policy." Likewise, Anzaldúa's commitment to the social act of writing puts *Borderlands* at the forefront of current political debates concerning the role of the University in American political life. Synchronically, the strategy Anzaldúa adopts to use the language, concepts, codes, and categories of the Academy against itself is in step with the current uses of deconstruction within the current American Academic critical debates to solicit the *logos* of Western metaphysics. In both *mestiza* consciousness and deconstruction there is a double movement, a necessity even, on the one hand to use the metaphysical categories of the Western tradition from a certain outside without being swallowed, doing so without its critical force being neutralized on the other.

One major point of difference between *mestiza* consciousness and deconstruction, and this due to the former's status as "minor" theory, is in the choice of critical vocabulary. As many critics of deconstruction have pointed out, deconstruction, despite its claim to a certain exteriority, works with high canonical texts and with a high canonical critical vocabulary. By contrast, *mestiza* consciousness asks the minor writer to begin writing in her 'home(ly)' dialect and right where she is. This point of departure takes further the logic of *bricolage* insofar as the imperative to liberate herself from the grip of a repressive Academic ideology gathers its force from the assumption and proposition that no vocabulary other than her native tongue is needed to speak about the the politics of her own liberation. Such a dialectical point in the composition of *Borderlands* is equivalent to the sociolinguistic affirmation that dialects, regional, social, or otherwise, are equal in their expressive capacity to the social circumstances from which they emerge. It is on the foothold of this sociolinguistic truism that my reading of *Borderlands* bases the etymological montage between the terms dialects and

dialectics. Furthermore, the sociolinguistic orientation brings into play another distinction that Anzaldúa is also fond of making and that parallels the major-minor distinction. In interview, Anzaldúa also refers to her mode of theory construction as a "low" variety, a distinction that echoes the distinction made by such sociolinguists as Joshua Fishman and Charles Ferguson.³ Though the details of the distinction are subtle and not easily summarizable, scholars such as Fishman and Ferguson agree that the High versus Low distinction between language varieties with respect to a specific sociolinguistic context has irreducibly to do with the use of the former for formal discourse situations and the latter with informal interaction. Because Anzaldúa's explicit goal in writing theory in the low mode is to loosen the grip that represssive ideology has on the consciousness (and hence the body) of minor writers, she seizes on the political nature of this sociolinguistic phenomenon and uses it to shed light on the politics of theory construction in general. In *Making Faces, Making Soul Haciendo Caras* (1990), she explicitly states:

We need to de-academize theory and to connect the community to the academy. 'High' theory does not translate well when one's intention is to communicate to masses of people made up of different audiences. We need to give up the notion that there is a 'correct' way to write theory. (xxvi)⁴

From the standpoint of such a communicative goal, the linguistic codes Anzaldúa's employs to write *Borderlands* stretch to bridge the "diglossic" split between low and high theory. Chapter five of *Borderlands*, "How to Tame a Wild tongue", a discourse on the linguistic contact between English and Spanish in the United States borderlands, takes explicit aim at this diglossic split. The choice to write in a low dialect, from the moment she presses pen to paper, contests the general state of affairs she summarizes with the bold predication (54): "Language is a male discourse." The straightforward declarative sentence solicits the Western

logos at a pervasive site in its historical unfolding: the use of masculine pronouns to refer to both male and female. As the linguistic history of both English and Spanish (along with the other members of the Indo-European family of languages in general) records, the male pronoun is the unmarked way for referring to both males and females, even if in a plurality there is only one male. Anzaldúa pinpoints this mode of reference to mark the erasure of female identity in English and Spanish as metonym for the erasure of a Chicano/a presence from American history in general.⁵ By seizing the metonymic parallel of part to whole--Chicanas are to language what Chicanos/as are to United States history--Anzaldúa employs *mestiza* consciousness to expose the limits of the logic of identity. In *mestiza* style, she affirms a mode of identity that is secure on neither side of the United States-Mexico borderlands (63): "We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness" she affirms. And precisely at the point at which she and the Chicana/o borderlands would disappear, and by implication, the logic of identity as a whole, she reasserts: "I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. *A veces no soy nada ni nadie, Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy.*" There is a permanence that must be attributed to the Chicana borderlands as long as English and Spanish define a sociopolitical zone of contact in the United States. The historical essentialisms that guarantee the survival of the Chicana borderlands and perforce appear in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* are emblematically inscribed in the stylistic code-switch to Spanish. There is no denying that certain essentialisms indeed accompany the composition of *Borderlands*. But it is equally true that the *mestiza* style Anzaldúa employs to encode them works in tandem with her *mestiza* consciousness to give a non-simple view of their identity, a view that cannot remain within the law of non-contradiction.

Throughout the unfolding of "How to Tame a Wild Tongue", Anzaldúa puts *mestiza* consciousness and style to work alongside each other in order to bridge her critical vision of life with her experience of living in the borderlands. Her descriptions of Chicana ways of speaking and writing are particularly interesting because they presuppose that one does not have to be an expert in sociolinguistics to address issues of language and identity. The descriptions and presupposition together challenge the Western prescriptivist authorities that would denigrate Chicana ways of speaking and writing through their institutional disposition to reify Western languages rather than submitting them to historical process. In *mestiza* style, Anzaldúa provides a remarkably concise and accurate picture of the English-Spanish linguistic contact zone in the Valley of South Texas. In fact, I do not think it overstates the case to say that the account of linguistic attitudes toward Chicana ways of speaking are largely descriptively adequate and as such strategically generalizable to other regions of the United States where English and Spanish are in contact. Thus, the anecdote with which she opens this chapter, in which she finds herself in a dentist's chair, turns a metaphor for the general diglossia between English and Spanish in the United States. In the figure Anzaldúa turns, the dentist fills the role of Anglo English as the superposed, High variety, while Anzaldúa's tongue, getting in the way of the dentist's instruments and tasks, represents Spanish, the low variety in the United States. Anzaldúa straightaway makes clear why the linguistic codes of Chicanas is the low variety in the United States borderlands, doing so in the code-switching speech of her mother:

I want you to speak English. *Pa' hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien, Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un 'accent' "* mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. (italics in original, 53, 54)

What this passage accentuates is the extent to which Chicana English and Spanish are stigmatized varieties of language in the borderlands specifically because of their intonational patterns. Encapsulated in Anzaldúa's mother's exhortation to speak English without an accent is the recognition not only that Anglo English in its standard variety is the language of economic advancement in the United States, but also that the intonational patterns of Spanish-accented English are somehow unaesthetic to the ear. How many of us have changed our accent precisely for these reasons? And what is it about the locutionary streams of sound that Chicanos and Chicanas produce that make these ways of speaking so aesthetically unpleasant? As Fernando Peñalosa (1985) has established, the politics of Spanish-accented English are much too severe to ignore, because, like the little girl's entry into the symbolic sphere of language always implies an erasure, the entry into the American school system of Chicana and Chicano children with Spanish-accented English into the American school system also implies an equivalent erasure. Peñalosa's sociolinguistic work makes it no secret that Spanish-accented English is more often than not perceived by teachers as a lack of intelligence. Given the tenacity with which these perceptions of accent cling to the Chicana, it is not surprising that Anzaldúa focuses on the politics of dialect perception and punctuates her vision with the stark point (54): "Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out." (54) Such an assertion serves as reminder Western prescriptivism of a discursive point the science of linguistics views as commonplace--namely that the legislation of one language over another is likely to engender more political division than unity. In this respect, Anzaldúa's attitudes toward language seem more in tune with those of sociolinguistics, which as a discipline assumes that linguistic change is the unmarked situation for the world's languages and for that reason takes a more *laissez-faire* attitude toward language change and variation.⁶ As present-

day Modern English has changed from its Old and Middle English stages through contact with other languages such as Old Norse and Anglo-Norman French in order to adapt itself to new social situations, and as Vulgar Latin subdivided to produce the various Romance languages, so Chicana English and Spanish language varieties find themselves under the same type of social forces that bring about linguistic change. Again in *mestiza* code-switching style Anzaldúa affirms the linguistic circumstance of Spanish in the borderlands:

Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. Change, *evolución, enriquecimiento de palabras por invención o adopción* have created variants of Chicano Spanish, *un nuevo lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir.* (55)

Unlike the prescriptivist tradition that regards linguistic change as corruption, Anzaldúa places Chicana linguistic codes squarely within the social forces of history and refuses their wholesale reification. Anzaldúa guards against her tendency to reify these codes not by appealing to the colloquial wisdom of a Mexican proverb, as when she says, "*Quien tiene boca se equivoca.*" Thematically, the proverb is a form of aphoristic philosophy that can be read as having an illocutionary force equivalent to the critical axiom Derrida announces when he states (1970:254): "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique." Phonetically, the proverb is also interesting because its pronunciation in Chicana English entails the differentiation of the the voiced bilabial fricative and the voiced labiodental, a distinction Standard Spanish would not make in any case since both segments are pronounced as voiced bilabial fricatives. Whatever level of generality Anzaldúa extracts from her linguistic experience is conditioned by the social forces responsible for shaping both Chicana Spanish and English:

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who

cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? (55)

In the illocutionary force of this rhetorical question both question and answer inhabit the same syntax. In the stylistic choice, the declarative responds to the interrogative by pointing to the 'empirical necessity' that fosters the survival of Chicana ways of speaking. This empirical necessity stems from the same sociohistorical conditions that brought Chicana Spanish and English into being, namely, the United States-Mexico borderlands themselves. That is, the borderlands guarantee the maintenance of Chicana English and Spanish--will not allow its wild tongue to be cut out--because it is not likely that the sociopolitical conditions that produced this division in the Americas in the first place will disappear any time soon, if ever.

¹ Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa

² Review of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, *Village Voice* (June 28, 1988): 60, 62.

³ For Joshua Fishman's classical account of the High-Low distinction see "The Relationship Between Micro- and Macro-Sociolinguistics in the Study of Who Speaks What Language to Whom and When," in *Sociolinguistics*, eds. J. B. Pride & Janet Holmes, (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1972), 15-32. C. A. Ferguson's, "Diglossia," is in *Language and Social Context*, ed. Pier Paolo Giglioli, (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1972), 232-251. For an elaboration of the empirical and theoretical subtleties entailed by the High-Low distinction see Ralph Fasold, *The Sociolinguistics of Society*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, "Haciendo Caras, Making Face," pp. xv-xxvii.

⁵ Deborah Cameron, "Demythologizing Sociolinguistics: Why Language does not Reflect Society," in *Ideologies of Language*, eds John E. Joseph and Talbot J. Taylor, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Routledge, 1990): 79-93.

⁶ For the sociolinguistic work emphasizing the empirical character of questions related to sound change within a particular speech community see William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), especially chapter 1, which deals with the social motivation of sound changes. Labov's study

of sound change within the speech community of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts is particularly interesting because it provides a synchronic record of sound change, whereas diachronic accounts are more readily available in introductory texts of historical linguistics,