



Hybridity: A High Breed of Antiimperialist Politics

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In the excerpts from the 1987 book, *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria E. Anzaldúa powerfully illustrates the notion of hybridity. She explains, for example, that “[...] Chicano Spanish is a border tongue [...] which they [people who have been violently decentralized and deterritorialized] can connect their identity to [... a language] capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves [...] with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages” (55). Hybridity here appears to be twofold, consisting of, on the one hand, ways of knowing, and on the other hand, ways of being. But what do scholars have to say about the epistemological and ontological elements seen in Anzaldúa’s illustration of hybridity? And how does this theorizing figure outside the academy? Using these two questions to

frame my essay, here I explore Anzaldúa’s illustration of hybridity. I begin by examining both the epistemological and ontological elements seen in the illustration. Then I review scholarly responses to these elements. I end by arguing that Anzaldúa’s illustration of hybridity overall is in fact antiimperialist.

Anzaldúa’s illustration of hybridity can be divided into two categories. First, it can be classified as epistemological. Second, it can be classified as ontological. Starting with the epistemological element seen in Anzaldúa’s illustration of hybridity, ways of knowing, indeed, are an aspect that comes out strongly in Anzaldúa’s meditation on Chicano Spanish. How can truths about being Chicano be expressed in a context of violent decentralization and deterritorialization? Anzaldúa asks this question to remind us of what Michel Foucault calls “subjugated knowledges” (81), truths that have been

marginalized by the powers that be. In Anzaldúa's case, these powers would be the forces of imperialism. They justify why "[w]e [Chicanos] needed a language with which we could communicate with ourselves" (55), why Chicanos' culturally rich ways of knowing were tossed outside the Eurocentre (Foucault 81-2). Anzaldúa attempts to undo this tossing, recentering and reterritorializing Chicanos' truths. She demarginalizes them by enumerating "[s]ome of the languages we [Chicanos] speak" (55) and describing her spongelike character. For Anzaldúa knowledge produces and is produced by language; language permeates all and so renders Chicanos absorbers and producers of knowledge. This aspect of language-knowledge is vivid via her self-reflection, whereby we see how even "talk[ing] freely" (55) cannot be extricated from processes of inclusion and exclusion. The mechanisms that regulate language-knowledge are too strong, too powerful —

indeed too embedded in what Patricia Hill Collins so brilliantly called a "matrix of domination" (227) — for the expression of truth to exist outside political dynamics. Stating that "[t]he *pocho* is an anglicized Mexican or American of Mexican origin who speaks Spanish with an accent characteristic of North Americans and who distorts and reconstructs the language according to the influence of English" (56), Anzaldúa makes no point in hiding her understanding of this. By virtue of her multiple subject position, she appreciates that more than the (minority) expression of truth is required to undermine the complex relations of European control (Collins 227-9).

Thus

Anzaldúa notes the disruptive potential of *Pachuco*. She argues that "*Pachuco* (the language of the zoot suiters) is a language of rebellion, both against Standard Spanish and Standard English" (56), that explodes dominant ways of using language. For Anzaldúa

this explosion is superficial; *Pachuco* is contingent upon “practice and [...] having others who can speak it” (56). *Pachuco* does not burst wide open the powers that be owing to its precariousness, and so we are left to wonder just what kind of language-knowledge is nonprecarious. Since Anzaldúa explores Chicano Spanish next, we can bet that the requirement for nonprecariousness is met by this particular language-knowledge.

Chicano Spanish is a residue of “Spanish/Anglo colonization” (57). It is regulated by accentuation, syntax, and geography. Archaism best sums up Chicano Spanish, since “Chicanos['] use [of] archaisms” (57) represents the transregional domination the language-knowledge currently undergoes. The latter aspect is vivid via Chicanos’ “use [of] anglicisms” (57), whereby we see how Chicano Spanish is a modulation of English epistemologies. Anzaldúa makes this clearer by stating that

“Tex-Mex argot [...] is the result of the pressures on Spanish speakers to adapt to English” (57). Indeed Chicano Spanish is complex; it exists in fragments that attest to the trauma of epistemic violence. We would be missing the point if we lamented this thing we call “epistemic violence,” though, since what exactly constitutes epistemic violence? And how does this constitution figure in the Chicano Spanish situation?

Anzaldúa enquires into “linguistic terrorism” (58) to provide a tentative answer to these questions. She flags the process of internalization, whereby we see how “the belief that we [Chicanas] speak poor Spanish” (58) has radical effects. For example, we remember Jacques Lacan’s illustration of a mirror stage when Anzaldúa states that “[t]o be close to another Chicana is like looking into a mirror. We are afraid of what we’ll see there” (58). Indeed Chicanas are not “just”; they require “Others” to turn into (hailed) speaking subjects (Lacan

503). The affect of this process is vivid when Anzaldúa subsequently states, “[*P*]ena. Shame. Low self-esteem” (58). Here we see how the hostility amongst Chicanas and between Chicanas and nonChicanas cannot be extricated from the subjugation of Chicano Spanish. Clearly Chicano Spanish — and more specifically “Chicano language [and] Chicano experience” (58) — are interwoven yet heterogeneous sites of (marginalized) knowledge production.

Thus it is not surprising that “[b]y the end of this century, Spanish speakers will comprise the biggest minority group in the U.S” (59). Chicano activity is being subjugated by claims to legitimacy, both epistemological and ontological. And if we follow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s elaboration of Foucault’s illustration of epistemic violence, we find that the term “epistemic violence” does sum up the devastating process (76). Chicano activity is nonprecarious

in the sense that its devastation is the condition for its own possibility. By being subjugated by the powers that be, this strong cultural vitality promises to be a source of resistance.

If we better understand Chicano Spanish by moving away from its epistemological dimensions, Anzaldúa is not at fault when she brings ways of being into the picture. Ontologies, indeed, are as important as epistemologies. She calls for “a cosmic race [...] a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world” (77). With it comes “a consciousness of the Borderlands” (77), reminding us of Georg W. F. Hegel’s illustration of a thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic. *Arycaness*, for example, comes to merge with *Chicanoness*, producing a blend of both ways of being. The newly-produced ontology is not simply a sort of “*Arycanoness*”; by rupturing the thesis/antithesis binary, it complicates and complexifies diversity, allowing for a richer understanding of what it

means to “be” and by extension what it means to be “*mestiza*” (77), or what it means to be heterogeneous. Anzaldúa calls for hybridity by situating her discussion in a context of feelings, attitudes, and moods (Kaufmann 154).

Her exploration of *mestiza* ontology also bears a striking resemblance to Frantz Fanon’s illustration of a black man’s way of being. As the black man is ontologically dead, the *mestiza* is a site of abject production: “[Her] dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness [... The *mestiza* is] in a state of perpetual transition” (Anzaldúa 78). Anzaldúa causes us to see how the *mestiza*, too, is a split subject, a liminal figure who oscillates between the “here” of Chicanoness and the “there” of Aryanness (Fanon 10-1).

Anzaldúa also causes us to see how the *mestiza*’s Other is less “Aryan people” and more her own breed. Indeed, “perceiv[ing] the version of reality that our [*mestiza* people’s]

culture communicates[, ...] get[ting] multiple, often opposing messages” (78), the *mestiza* is at war with herself. She experiences “a cultural collision” (78) of Aryanness, Chicanoness, and more, of course, but she also develops “a counterstance” (78) of ferality, sensing her heterogeneities turning in upon themselves. The *mestiza* is pulled in and out of her consciousness in the sense that she is an intricate being both on and outside subjugated terrain (Fanon 12). For Anzaldúa she is all over the map, bringing home how the *mestiza*’s in-betweenness, like that of the black man, opens up the possibility for transcendence. Indeed like an independent agent the *mestiza* produces the very conditions that allow her to escape the stranglehold of the Eurocentre. Anzaldúa illuminates the subject’s occasion for resistance: “Only by remaining flexible is she [the *mestiza*] able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically” (79). Here we see how the *mestiza* has to adapt to imperial

plunder in order to mitigate it. Anzaldúa continues, “*La mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking [...] to divergent thinking” (79). Indeed the *mestiza* must not only develop “a more whole perspective” (79) that throws into confusion coloniality; she has to espouse a complex of “contradictions[, ...] ambiguity[, ... and] ambivalence” (79) that radically disrupts her sense of self and broader identity. This process is vivid when Anzaldúa subsequently states, “She [the *mestiza*] can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence” (79). Here we are reminded of Jean-Paul Sartre’s illustration of a “freedom-for-all” reality, whereby we remember how the *mestiza*, by struggling against herself, is in reality struggling against her many and various self-Others. Indeed her location is characterized by a turbulence “where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs”

(79), sparking “a *mestiza* consciousness” (80), or anticolonial sensibility, that “break[s] down the subject-object duality” (80), turns Westernity on its head, and engenders a vast project of change. For Anzaldúa the *mestiza* transcends the here and now by being a mash-up of activity, passivity, and potentiality (Sartre 439-40). The *mestiza* is a “free” being in the sense that she lets herself be unsettled by her own ontology.

And if the *mestiza* is this porous and far-reaching, the ontological element seen in Anzaldúa’s illustration of hybridity is necessarily susceptible to harsh criticism. The same is true for its epistemological counterpart, since by being required to understand the ontological element, the epistemological counterpart proves to be constitutive of the ontological Other (Lacan 503). Both the epistemological and ontological elements seen in Anzaldúa’s illustration of hybridity have been harshly criticized,

and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, in the 1994 article, “Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*: Cultural Studies, ‘Difference,’ and the Non-Unitary Subject,” provides an entry point to these heated debates. She explains how the elements have been charged with reproducing essentialist discourses and practices. For example, when Anzaldúa states, “This weight on her [the *mestiza*’s] back—which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo?” (82), some scholars argue that Anzaldúa elucidates the *mestiza* as a singular, fixed, and “given” site of knowing and being (Yarbro-Bejarano 12). Pablo Vila, in the 2003 article, “Processes of Identification on the U.S.-Mexico Border,” for instance, posits the thesis that Anzaldúa actually makes the *mestiza* less hybrid by turning the U.S.-Mexico border monolithic (608). Similarly, Zalfa Feghali, in the 2011 article, “Re-articulating the New *Mestiza*,” makes the assertion that

Anzaldúa empties whiteness of its heterogeneity by leaving “the relationship between race and culture” (65) unexamined (65). But the line of argument Yarbro-Bejarano is identifying here is best exemplified in Cristina Beltran’s 2004 article, “Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies and the Challenge of *Mestizaje*.” Beltran posits the thesis that Anzaldúa creates a “hierarchy of hybridity” (600) by drawing on the power of indigeneity. For her Anzaldúa uses discourses and practices belonging to a tradition of Aztlánlian-national production, celebrating the *mestiza*’s positionality while undertheorizing the possibility that all people could be heterogeneous sites of epistemological and ontological formation (596).

This bleeds into a second line of argument Yarbro-Bejarano identifies as being characteristic of the harsh criticism against both the epistemological and ontological elements seen in Anzaldúa’s illustration of hybridity.

She explains that the elements have been charged with reproducing elitist activity. As seen in Beltran's case, for some scholars, instances such as when Anzaldúa states, "The first step [to a real healing of *mestiza* people's psyches] is to unlearn the *puta/virgen* dichotomy and to see *Coatlapo- peuh-Coatlicue* in the Mother, *Guadalupe*" (84), are seen as harbouring a sentiment of ideality. In the introduction to the 1997 book, *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*, David Johnson and Scott Michael- sen, to illustrate, argue that "Anzaldúa's re- sorting to 'indigenusness' in order to ac- count for such feelings [completeness and totality] is both a grasping at mythic- nostalgic straws and, on another level, little more than liberal-humanist politics" (qtd. in García n. pag.). The second line of argument Yarbrow-Bejarano identifies is a modulation of the first. It can be summed up as scandal- izing the recolonizing effects of Anzaldúa's "romantic" move.

But Yarbrow-Bejarano defends Anzaldúa against these lines of argument. She explains that the elements have not been properly situat- ed. For example, when Anzaldúa states, "Being the supreme crossers of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet [...] Our goal is to link people with each other—the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials" (84-5), Yarbrow- Bejarano argues that Anzaldúa is not writing in a "let's-homogenize-homosexuals" con- text but in a reality where Chicanas and Chi- canos — and by extension people in general — are being subjugated by neo/coloniality (8-11). Yarbrow-Bejarano also explains that the elements have stemmed from a minority essentialist discourse and practice. For ex- ample, when Anzaldúa states, "It takes too much time and energy to explain to the

downwardly mobile, white middle-class women that it's okay for us to want to own 'possessions'" (85), Yarbrow-Bejarano makes the case that Anzaldúa does not so much "simply" as tactically homogenize white middle-class women. Borrowing Spivak's formulation, Yarbrow-Bejarano asserts that Anzaldúa draws on "the '[s]trategic use of positivist essentialism'" (12) to actively undo the erasure of nonnormative people (13).

This brings us to Yarbrow-Bejarano's third and final counterargument: that the elements have proven to be anticolonial. What is so interesting about this point is that it is in line with one of Ana Cruz García's key assertions in the 2008 article, "A Borderland Consciousness: Una conciencia de mujer in *Borderlands/La Frontera*." García explains that the elements are most antithetical to the colonial project. For example, when Anzaldúa states, "[...] each of us [people of colour] must know our Indian lineage, our

afro-mestisaje, our history of resistance" (86), García argues that Anzaldúa's turn to the past is necessarily performative-radical. As she puts it, "she [Anzaldúa] is using [indigenous figures] to counter contemporary masculine discourse and to project a newer sense of a female self, a speaking subject, a Chicana identity, with a modern view of historical consciousness" (n. pag.). Yarbrow-Bejarano's argument finds resonance in a more contemporary account of Anzaldúa's illustration of hybridity, indicating that Yarbrow-Bejarano's reasoning, despite being minority, is not far-fetched at all.

In fact I use it to make the case that both the epistemological and ontological elements seen in Anzaldúa's illustration of hybridity are not reproductive of imperialism but performative of a politics of antiimperialism. Indeed, Anzaldúa uses a methodology of deconstruction to do what Judith Butler might call "undoing" (1) the *mestiza*. For example, when she states, "I am

an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings” (81), Anzaldúa is “demestizaizing” the *mestiza* by making an economy of creativity out of her (Butler 1-2). To be sure she uses Jacques Derrida’s technique of unraveling throughout her discussion. Stating that “[n]othing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (87), Anzaldúa ecologically dismantles the ways of being of *mestiza* people. For example, when she states, “[...] all you [non-*mestiza*] people wound us when you reject us [...] We can no longer withdraw [...] Here we are weaponless with open arms, with only our magic” (88), Anzaldúa is using her own imagination to assemble who the *mestiza* is. In fact, as a subsequent passage illustrates, she successfully anchors her writing in the ferality of *mestiza* people: “I

stand at the river, watch the curving, twisting serpent, a serpent nailed to the fence where the mouth of the *Rio Grande* empties into the Gulf [...] The sudden pull in my gut [...] *Tierra natal*” (89). Here Anzaldúa shows how *mestiza* people’s ferality is further constitutive of what it means to *be mestiza*. She subsequently states, “Like the ancients, I worship the rain God and the maize goddess, but unlike my father, I have recovered their names. Now for rain (irrigation) one offers not a sacrifice of blood, but of money” (90). This passage does an excellent job at summing up what Anzaldúa does throughout her illustration of hybridity. Anzaldúa draws on the gains of the genealogical strategy, grounding her work in a context where desires leak, affects are messy, and futures are queer (Derrida 61).
 Moreover, since her account of *mestiza* epistemology and ontology poses a resistance to, and recreation of, not only the *mestiza* but

her own sense of being, it can be said to belong to a (French feminist) tradition of difference (Bigwood 7). And if Anzaldúa's illustration of hybridity as a whole can be seen as being in the likes of Trinh T. Minh-ha, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray's re/vision of the category "woman," for example, it is clear that it is necessarily opening up a horizon of nonimperialism. For Anzaldúa's illustration of hybridity is a "no longer put up with it" (83) politic — indeed an antiimperialist vitality — by both deconstructing the entire project of European control and constructing something off the map.

Indeed throughout this essay I allude to how Anzaldúa's illustration of hybridity is simply not twofold. It is not merely constituted by epistemologies and ontologies. It is, rather, threefold, constituted by ways of knowing, on the one hand, ways of being, on the other hand, and ways of doing, on some other hand. Anzaldúa's illustration of hy-

bridty is truly revolutionary by being all three of the following: epistemological, ontological, and methodological. The third element here is exactly the "third element" (80) she talks about: something that actively drives the "will be again" (91) of de/subjugated times and spaces and resulting antiimperialist worlds. Scholars cannot overlook this "active" aspect of Anzaldúa's illustration of hybridity. Anzaldúa's "recoloniality" is justified by the fact that a struggle against Westernity is a struggle that requires the critical borrowing of coloniality. That said, I wonder whether there is a fourth element that could help illuminate our unrelenting will to categorize things as belonging to whatever (first, second, third, etc.) time and space. Why is it that we have a strong attachment to essentialism, be it strategic or not? Could it be that human beings are inherently predisposed to (tragic) critical thinking? I think a deeper exploration of af-

fect could help us answer questions pertain-

ing to the things here that are prediscursive.

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