



## *The Struggle for Language Rights* Naming and Interrogating the Colonial Legacy of “English Only”

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**Abstract:** In this article, Lilia Bartolomé theorizes about her personal experiences and links the language suppression she experienced to the internal colonization framework that Gloria Anzaldúa utilized to explain the subordinate linguistic and social status of people of color in the United States. Bartolomé also illustrates how the English-only movement functions to *domesticate* people of color while it serves to *integrate* white immigrant groups into the dominant culture. In her view, educators who refuse to connect with Anzaldúa’s cry for human dignity and liberation will remain complicit and reap benefits from the “tradition of silence.” In contrast, educators who are ideologically and politically clear will always transcend the mechanization of teaching and learning so as to denounce the xenophobia that parades itself under the banner of patriotism and “English for the children.” Their political clarity will invariably give them the ethical courage to highlight the fact that indigenous people and many Mexican Americans did not cross the border. In fact, the border crossed them. Teachers’ political and ideological clarity should also imbue them with enough empathy to understand the inextricable link between language, identity, voice, and hope.

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*Deslenguadas.* (We are de-tongued.)  
*Somos los del español deficiente.* [We are those with deficient Spanish.]  
We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestizaje, the subject of your burla [The subject of your joke]. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and

linguistically somos huérfanos [We are orphans]—we speak an orphan tongue. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 58)

I am one of those Chicanas who early in life was locked into a *barrio* existence where I was made to feel ashamed of speaking Spanish—shame that painfully reproduced itself as I was devalued yet again for being a non-Standard English speaker. I am one

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of those “culturally crucified” Chicanas who struggled to understand what it means to be a cultural orphan. This process not only denied me the signposts needed to form a psychologically healthy identity, but also contributed to a form of cultural schizophrenia that Homi Bhabha (1994) appropriately defines as a permanent state of cultural homelessness. I struggled in this state of cultural homelessness, attempting to reconcile the requirement to exterminate my cultural and linguistic selves with the promise that I would at best be a hyphenated American, and at worst be relegated to subhumanity, as Jean Paul Sartre (1967) so accurately described the colonial condition. It was this state of cultural homelessness that led me to Gloria Anzaldúa.

Gloria Anzaldúa has had a tremendous influence on both my professional and my personal life. At a personal level, Anzaldúa helped me understand much of what had troubled me growing up as a Chicana and a member of a historically subordinated cultural group in the United States: She helped me understand why I felt a sense of inferiority and self-hate, why I resented whites, and why I felt shame and rejection whenever I spoke Spanish in places where it was frowned upon and among people who held the expectation that I (and my family members) should assimilate—that is, lose our language and culture in order to become imperfect facsimiles and, ultimately, unacceptable copies of white Americans. I felt this powerful yet unspoken and unnamed shame, and although I wanted to “squeeze the shame out”—as Malcolm X encouraged colonized people to do—I didn’t know how. Instead, I often assumed a false bravado and an in-your-face attitude, because anger would overcome me and I did not have the language to express my recognition of efforts to reject me, to subordinate me, and to oppress me.

As a young woman, I had particular difficulty communicating with white peers, whom I perceived as condescending in

their treatment of me and other people of color. When I read Anzaldúa and others, I learned to “lovingly” yet vigorously challenge white colleagues who too often took (and still take) it upon themselves to speak for me and other people of color—a skill that comes in handy in the academy, I can assure you.

Through Anzaldúa’s writing, I learned the importance of developing a political language with which to name my colonization, and so to find a voice—*my* voice. In Anzaldúa’s essay “La Prieta” (the dark-skinned one), she powerfully captured the indignation people of color feel but often are unable to articulate when whites arrogantly speak for them. As bell hooks (1990) points out, many white women believe that there is no need to hear the voices of women of color when white women can “talk about you better than you can speak about yourself.” Anzaldúa (1983) accurately described this phenomenon of white women attempting to “de-voice” women of color:

White women flock to our parties...come to our readings, take up our cause. I have no objections to this. What I mind is the pseudo-liberal ones who suffer from the white women’s burden. She takes a missionary role. She attempts to talk for us—what a presumption! This act is a rape of our tongue and our acquiescence is complicity to that rape. We women of color have to stop being modern medusas—throats cut—silenced into mere hissing. (p. 206)

Gloria Anzaldúa’s successful combination of historical narrative, poetry, and myth blurs conventional forms of discourse and exemplifies what it means to transcend the rigidity of borders as both an academic and a human being. Her accessible discussions regarding Chicano colonization and white supremacist ideology—that which

has been embedded in our psyches and that we, as subordinated people, unconsciously have come to accept—resonated with me as I struggled with unarticulated feelings of inferiority and attempted to recapture the humanity I was denied.

Anzaldúa's writings helped me name my colonization and begin the process of "squeezing it out." In another section of her essay "La Prieta," Anzaldúa fearlessly detailed *la vergüenza* (the shame) that so many of us colonized individuals feel when we come in contact with members of the dominant culture, and also with members of our own culture who have internalized white supremacist beliefs:

Eating at school out of sacks, hiding our "lonches," papas con chori-zo, behind cupped hands and bowed heads, gobbling them up before the other kids could see. Guilt lay folded in the tortilla. The Anglo kids laughing—calling us "tortilleros," the Mexican kids taking up the word and using it as a club with which to hit each other. ...After a while we stopped taking our lunch. (1983, p. 201)

Anzaldúa refused to assume simplistic, deterministic, or binary positions when she challenged Chicanos and other colonized people never to lose hope while we interrogated not only our oppression, but also our own active role in reproducing and maintaining that oppression. In reminding us of the power of our own human agency, Anzaldúa offered us hope of overcoming the internalization of white supremacist ideologies. She courageously wrote of her struggles to "squeeze the colonized" out of her:

It has taken over thirty years to unlearn the belief instilled in me that white is better than brown—something that some people of color never will unlearn. And it is only

now that the hatred of myself, which I spent the greater part of my adolescence cultivating, is turning to love. (1983, p. 208)

Anzaldúa courageously named our subordination and explained it using an internal colonization framework of analysis. In doing so, she, along with other progressive writers, provided us with theories and a language we could assume to develop *our* voice, which we could use to describe *our* experiences from *our* perspectives.

Just as she influenced my personal development, Anzaldúa has had a powerful impact on my work as an educator and researcher. Her use of an internal colonization framework of analysis to describe the plight of people of color in the United States and her desire to explicitly name racist dominant ideologies—to make them visible so we could clearly perceive them, resist them, and eradicate them—are as necessary today as when she began writing.

Especially relevant is Anzaldúa's challenge to progressive educators to interrogate educational theories that serve to maintain racist perceptions of and unjust material conditions for children of color. Anzaldúa (1990) maintained that "necesitamos teorías [we need theories] that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders that blur boundaries" (p. xxv). She powerfully reminded us that for scholars of color, making theories

means being in alien territory and suspicious of the laws and walls. It means being concerned about the ways knowledges are invented. It means continually challenging institutionalized discourses. It means being suspicious of the dominant culture's interpretation of "our" experience, of the way they "read" us. (p. xxv)

The need to challenge institutionalized dominant discourses around linguistic minority education is urgent. In particular, educators must challenge the dominant culture's explanations for linguistic minority students' historical, enduring, and disproportionate academic failure rates and, in the process, offer new theories and perspectives. Instead of uncritically accepting such explanations as a racial deficit or simplistic cultural differences to explain away this history of academic underachievement, we urgently need to theorize about the significant role that white supremacist ideologies and the remnants of colonialism play in creating conditions in which students of color are subordinated and domesticated.

The need to recognize the significance of ideology in education is crucial, particularly now that anti-immigrant fervor is once again at an all-time high and several states have passed laws forbidding the use of languages other than English in schools and other state institutions. The anti-immigrant sentiment has reached an obscene crescendo and has taken many oppressive forms in U.S. schools, such as a recent case in Massachusetts in which a public school principal was fired because she sent a letter home to Latino parents in Spanish. Along the same lines, a principal in Kansas City suspended a student for speaking Spanish in school. The irony is that this same student, who is being coerced to forget his Spanish, will later be required to demonstrate competency in a foreign language, should he be lucky enough to survive high school and go to college.

Against this xenophobic backdrop, it becomes evident, as Anzaldúa reminded us, that working with linguistic minority students is not solely a pedagogical issue but one that is primarily political and ideological at its core. The task educators face of successfully educating linguistic minority students includes struggling with longstanding educational and societal inequali-

ties and discrimination.

These inequalities range from increased segregation of minority students to an English-only, high-stakes testing movement, which unfairly tests linguistic minority students who are not yet proficient in academic English and who lack standardized-test-taking skills. Other challenges include enduring problems such as deficit perceptions and the mistreatment of poor and minority students.

In addition, the passage of English-only laws and the anti-immigrant mood in the United States promise to revert to the "good ol' days," when linguistic minority students were punished when caught speaking their native languages. In reality, deficit views of linguistic minority students, segregated schooling, anti-immigrant sentiment in general, and anti-Spanish language and anti-Latino sentiment in particular together constitute a sociohistorical and ideological mainstay—a taken-for-granted "fact of life" for many linguistic minority students in U.S. schools, a fact of life that has now become routinized as a commonsense master narrative.

I would argue that it's necessary to keep this sociohistorical backdrop in mind when discussing the current move to institute sheltered English instruction as the chief English-only teaching method for linguistic minority students in Massachusetts. I believe that in order to view and understand the current English-only movement more comprehensively—a movement being touted as well-intentioned and commonsensical—we need to theorize about this phenomenon using a model that recognizes our country's legacy of internal colonization in how it treats students of color, and the significant yet unacknowledged role that racist and assimilationist ideologies play in supporting this English-only movement.

States such as California, Arizona, and Massachusetts have ushered in modern-day versions of non-English-language pro-

hibition. I refer to these English-only mandates as modern-day prohibition because if we examine history, we find that although there have been moments in time (1960s to the 1980s) when languages other than English have been tolerated in schools and other institutions, the practice of forbidding the use of non-English languages has again become more prevalent in the United States.

What we are currently experiencing across the nation, as in the past, is what Terrence Wiley (1999) refers to as the veiled (and not so veiled) racist

prevailing English-only ideology in the United States [that] not only positions English as the dominant language, but also presumes universal English monolingualism to be a natural and ideal condition. ...[This] English monolingual ideology sees language diversity as a problem that is largely a consequence of immigration, and it equates the acquisition of English with assimilation, patriotism, and what it means to be an "American." (pp. 25-26)

In order to comprehend the current xenophobic English-only movement, it is necessary to critically understand this nation's assimilationist and monolingual legacy, not only in terms of its application to past European immigrants but also—and most importantly for our discussion here—in terms of its application to indigenous and nonwhite minorities. And in order to do so, we must situate our analysis, as Gloria Anzaldúa argued, within a colonial framework.

Despite the fact that the dominant culture equates the experiences of nonwhite minorities with European white immigrants of the past, the reality is that the United States has indigenous peoples and people of African origin as colonized sub-

jects, and that this history of internal colonization is still very much evident today. In particular, when we examine language policy in regard to domestic minority groups such as Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and descendents of enslaved Africans, we find that the sanctioned practice of linguistic suppression and cultural domestication has been the historical norm. One only has to examine the case of enslaved Africans, the first victims of repressive policies. Enslaved Africans were forbidden to speak their native tongues, and teaching these languages to their children bore the threat of brutal punishment. Furthermore, compulsory illiteracy laws were passed in Southern colonies to prohibit slaves from learning to read or write. Native Americans too were subject to horrific repressive policies that kept them separated from and subordinate to whites. Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Southwest suffered similarly after the U.S. conquest of what used to be northwestern Mexico.

This colonial legacy eventually merged into the English-only ideology that became hegemonic during WW I with the rise of the Americanization movement and the rampant persecution of speakers of German. However, in examining the origins of English-only ideology, it is imperative to highlight the differences between the experiences of European immigrants, such as Germans and Poles, and those of nonwhite subordinated minorities. As Wiley (1999) explains, "Despite the severity of the attack on the German language and the persecution of German Americans during WW I, there was no systematic effort to segregate them from Anglo Americans, as was the case for language minorities of color" (p. 28).

According to Ronald Schmidt (as cited in Wiley, 1999), the experience of linguistic minorities of color has been noticeably different from that of European immigrants in several respects:

- Nonwhite linguistic minorities were extended the benefits of public education more slowly and grudgingly than were European Americans, despite the fact that they too were taxed for their schooling.
- When education was offered to nonwhite linguistic minorities, it was usually done in segregated and inferior schools.
- Nonwhite linguistic-minority groups' cultures and languages were denigrated by public educators and others. These groups also were denied the opportunity to maintain and perpetuate their cultural heritage through the public schools.
- Reflective of these visible forms of rejection and exclusion by the dominant group in the society, the education that was offered to nonwhite linguistic minorities was exclusively assimilationist and functioned not to integrate the groups into the dominant culture, but to subordinate and socialize them for second-class citizenship. (adapted from Wiley, 1999, p. 28)

It is important to reiterate that even though language policies aimed at European immigrants and nonwhite linguistic-minority groups can similarly be described as "assimilationist," in the case of nonwhites they involved a *domestication* rather than an integration dimension. Anzaldúa powerfully captured the deceit involved in the false promise to people of color that they would be welcomed as first-class citizens if they gave up their cultures and primary languages in favor of English and the dominant culture. Along the same lines, Donald Macedo, Bessie Dendrinis, and Panayota Gounari<sup>1</sup> (2003) powerfully explain the distinctive and oppressive nature of what

<sup>1</sup> An organizer of the Third Annual Social Theory Forum, April 5-6, 2006, for which this paper was presented.

they term "colonial bilingualism":

There is a radical difference between a dominant speaker learning a second language and a minority speaker acquiring a dominant language. While the former involves the addition of a second language to one's linguistic repertoire, the latter usually inflicts the experience of subordination upon the minority speaker—both when speaking his or her native language, which is devalued by the dominant culture, and when speaking the dominant language he or she has learned, often under coercive conditions. ...Furthermore, the colonized's mother tongue, that which is sustained by his feelings, emotions, and dreams, that in which his tenderness and wonder are expressed, thus that which holds the greatest emotional impact, is precisely the one which is the least valued...[The colonized] must bow to the language of his master. (pp. 80-81)

In fact, efforts to forcibly strip subordinated minority groups of their culture and language as described by Macedo et al. constitutes a common practice relatively recently condoned in U.S. schools. Patricia MacGregor-Mendoza's (2000) research chronicles the physical and symbolic violence historically faced by Mexican Americans in the Southwest. One woman in her study recalled her experiences in elementary school in the state of New Mexico:

If we tried to speak Spanish our teachers would tell us, "Speak English dammit, this is America." Well, one day don't think I got fed up with it, and I told her, "You're the one in my country, you should learn my language." You should of

seen her face, she got so angry. She went to pick up a ruler and she hit me in the face with it. (Rosie C., unedited student writing, p. 358)

Similar research conducted by Aida Hurtado and Raul Rodriguez (1989) reports comparable findings. They write that over 40 percent of their Latino Texas college student sample reported having experienced some form of recrimination for speaking Spanish while attending primary or secondary school.

Given our tolerance of, if not complicity with, cultural and linguistic discriminatory practices in our democracy, the present proposition that immigrant children must learn English in one year through a sheltered English program is not only preposterous but academically dishonest. The dishonesty would quickly become self-evident if Americans were required to show the same level of proficiency within one year in their foreign languages programs. Despite the documented general failure of foreign language education in the United States, no one is suggesting that foreign language departments be closed down, as bilingual education has been.

One can only imagine the horrors Latinos and other linguistic minorities experience in state schools in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts today, where state laws prohibit the use of languages other than English and where specific forms of English-only instruction, such as sheltered English, have been imposed. The thinking, at least on the part of English-only proponents, is that sheltered English constitutes a method—a magic bullet of sorts—that is sure to cure the evil of earlier native language instruction. In fact, the general public is encouraged to perceive sheltered English as an instructional approach imbued with almost magical qualities that will render both immigrant and linguistic minority student English proficient in one year's time. The same public, however, is not encouraged to

understand that a majority of students eligible for the free lunch program in Massachusetts are *not* enrolled, and thus go to school hungry every day. If we were not blinded by our idolatry of methods, we would quickly realize that students will probably not learn much English if they go to school hungry, no matter how magical sheltered English instruction is believed to be.

As progressive educators, we must not forget that our work with linguistic minority students—most of whom are poor and nonwhite—is political work and not purely a pedagogical undertaking. We forgot this fact when we advocated for bilingual education as a technical issue and defended it using arguments based on research findings and statistics designed to disarticulate politics from education. Fundamentally, our arguments in defense of linguistic minority students should point to (1) the ideological nature of education that produces (2) the psychological violence that (3) fractures cultural and linguistic identities, as poignantly expressed by Anzaldúa (1987):

*El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arancó la lengua.* [The Anglo with the innocent face yanked out our tongue.] *Ahogados, escupimos el oscuro. Peleando con nuestra propia sombra, el silencio nos sepulta.* [Drowned, we spit darkness. Fighting with our very shadow, we are buried by silence.] (p. 54)

In conclusion, let me point out that educators who refuse to connect with Anzaldúa's cry for human dignity and liberation will remain complicit and reap benefits from the "tradition of silence." In contrast, educators who are ideologically and politically clear will always transcend the mechanization of teaching and learning so as to denounce the xenophobia that parades itself under the banner of patriotism and "English for the children." Their political

clarity will invariably give them the ethical courage to highlight the fact that indigenous people and many Mexican Americans did not cross the border. In fact, the border crossed them. Teachers' political and ideological clarity should also imbue them with enough empathy to understand the inextricable link between language, identity, voice, and hope as Gloria Anzaldúa eloquently stated:

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin-skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. 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 will overcome the tradition of silence. (1987, p. 59)

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