



Constructing Mestiza Consciousness Gloria Anzaldúa's Literary Techniques in *Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza*

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Abstract: In this essay I argue that the literary techniques in *Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza* as well as the form of the book are means by which Anzaldúa (also) renders her identity politics—the Mestiza consciousness. In other words, Mestiza consciousness does not come into being solely through the content of the book and the meaning of Anzaldúa's written words. It is chiseled also by a unique employment of multiple literary techniques that themselves embody a meaning and/or a value by which a layer of the writer's identity is implied. The essay provides an analysis of the strategic use of code-switching, first- and third-person transitions and related alternations in points of view from which Anzaldúa portrays a single event. Bilingualism of the book is also paid attention to and it is argued that each of Anzaldúa's languages refers to different value systems and to different lived experience. Further, this article shows at length the roots of Anzaldúa's persuasion that writing can possess therapeutic and healing qualities both for the writer and the reader and that in general artistic creation bears transformative potentials.

The style of *Borderlands* is a hybrid style: poetry, description, essay—we cross genres, cross borders. It's a new poetics. It's a new aesthetics...¹ (Gloria Anzaldúa)

Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza is a book acclaimed not only for the author's portrayal of the path that has led to the invention of her new self—the New Mestiza. The approaches to the composition of the book and the combinatory tech-

niques which have been used to describe the hybrid identity are hybrid in no lesser a degree and deserve equal considerations.

The work shows both the creative as well as the annihilating forces a person living in the borderlands—i.e. in between categories—must struggle against. Anzaldúa describes the tension that exists “wherever two or more cultures edge each other”² and invents her personal literary style where two or more kinds of literary techniques are united in a single sentence. Anzaldúa finds

¹ Anzaldúa, Gloria. “Border Crossings” in: *Trivia, Spring 1989*. New Amherst, 1989. p. 49.

² Anzaldúa, Gloria. “Preface to the First Edition” in: Anzaldúa, *Op. Cit.* p. 19.

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herself continually at a quest for an adequate means of self-expression; a style which would convey the internal hurt caused by historical, political, social, and also linguistic oppression and at the same time would embody the language which would perfectly fit her multiple identity—Mestiza consciousness.

Anzaldúa is both the inheritor of the indigenous tradition and the bearer of the Western academic thought which she has obtained pursuing her university education. The authoress thus inosculates these two contradictory approaches to language, and the literary style of *Borderlands/La Frontera* projects the writer's attempt at their mutual fusion and interconnectivity.

As Anzaldúa seeks a form of reconciliation of the two bordering cultures and her double linguistic background to both of which she belongs, she discovers a luculent instrument: the solution dwells in writing *Borderlands/La Frontera* bilingually.

Throughout the book the writer, gradually, composes a mosaic that in the end reveals a delicate new perspective for grasping the world's reality, and of course, a new approach to writing as such. Not only does Anzaldúa challenge set definitions and categories of gender, ethnic and sexual identity, she also shatters the academic criteria a piece of writing should obey. In an extraordinary way the authoress combines the old with the modern—her native tongue and ever-so flexible English. She also alternates between first and third person narration, which indicates her step-by-step growing awareness of collective and individual identity.

The experience Anzaldúa portrays can thus be understood as both a representative of Anzaldúa's autobiography as an individual and at the same time as a representative of the universal story of the Chicano people. The authoress confers on her writing: "...the literature that [I] write is not just about [my] experience; it's a cultural representation...in *Borderlands* I am representing

the mestiza, the Chicana culture. I'm **self**-representing it."³ Thus one finds that the listings of historical events in the book, involving the writer's coming to terms with her family's life, are epitomes of universal human experience. By such means Anzaldúa hopes that every individual can relate to her explication of the hybrid Mestiza identity and embrace the cultural differences.

Further, as a writer, she defines herself as a poet-shaman. She wants to heal herself and her culture from diverse modes of suffering that affect Native American communities. Anzaldúa writes a confession of someone who strives to preserve her cultural heritage and at the same time tries to grasp the contradictions that are intrinsic to the roots (and the self) which have sprung up from the border culture, the "thin edge of barbwire."⁴

One who reads Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* is expected to look for the message of the book beyond the printed words. The reader must rely on intuitive understanding; an unconscious link to the work will be born once the reader frees himself/herself from the conventional deciphering of the text. As the author's mixture of English and Spanish is spontaneous so is expected to be the reader—unbound and willing to accept all shifts in style and form as well as the emotions that the book arouses in him/her.

***BORDERLANDS'* HYBRID STYLE: MIXING GENRES**

To meet her goal in the readers, Anzaldúa utilizes numerous literary techniques and grants her book a special, flamboyant composition. The writing floats above the two main languages as well as above the styles used. Prose mingles with

³ Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Border Crossings" in: *Trivia, Spring 1989*. New Amherst, 1989. p. 47, (emphasis hers).

⁴ Anzaldúa, *Op. Cit.* p. 25.

poetry, English with Spanish, essays with *autohistorias*, history with myths. This is what Anzaldúa says about *Borderlands/La Frontera* in the fifth chapter of the book:

This...product [of writing] seems an assemblage, a montage, a beaded work with several leitmotifs and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance. The whole thing has had a mind of its own, escaping me and insisting on putting together the pieces of its own puzzle with minimal direction from my will. It is a rebellious, willful entity...for me it is alive, infused with spirit. I talk to it; it talks to me.⁵

The question then becomes evident: can Anzaldúa succeed in delivering a comprehensive message when the book's 'scaffolding'⁶ is not anchored in any pre-scribed category and the book aims to challenge given academic rules for writing? I believe so.

Having liberated herself from the academically dictated style of prose- and poetry-writing, she achieves a goal of unrestricted expression which both conveys and embodies the author's message and is the utter representation of freedom. Below I explain the methods of literary techniques employment that make meeting Anzaldúa's objectives possible.

The composition of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* openly acknowledges the Aztec mosaic-like pattern of writing. The Aztec codices were painted with red and black ink, the colors alternating one with another. The intertwined design of these

two colors symbolized wisdom and writing. The ancient Aztec civilization maintained that communication with the Divine Deities could be attained through the power of "metaphor and symbol, by means of poetry and truth." The two colors' continual emergence, disappearance and re-emergence anew again indicated a "thick-here, thick- there" pattern that suggested weaving motions.⁷

The interwoven variations in styles and genres are typical for the writing technique Anzaldúa has taken up in *Borderlands* and it is analogous to the weaving pattern of emergence/disappearance approached above. Anzaldúa thus explicitly manifests her affinity to the written heritage of her distant Aztec ancestry. Despite this historical connotation, her text and the style in which it is composed differ radically in its purpose from the old-time indigenous codices. Besides abrupt transitions from lecture-like essays on history and/or anthropology as well as aesthetics and sociology, sections written in prose are interlaced with poetry which crops up suddenly, as if unexpectedly. Yet, Anzaldúa argues, poetry's capacity for delivering meanings equals that of 'high theory'—what she calls established academic practices.

Anzaldúa's masterpiece does truly transcend existing theoretical rules of text composition as well as challenges the literary canon of the Anglo-American academy. *Borderlands'* aim is to enunciate the writer's struggle for her (and Chicano people's) cultural legacy and, at the same time, demonstrate her endeavor to "change composition, the way people write...because life is a permanent resistance against the status quo, the political climate, and against the academic standards of the different disciplines."⁸

Why does the authoress refuse to obey given academic doctrines and why does she insist on shaping a theory of her own?

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89-89.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88. References to the structuring of the book often carry allusions to human physiology (such as: "If I can get the bone structure right, then putting flesh on it proceeds without too many hitches."). Here scaffolding refers to "the deep structure [of the text]."

First, the entire concept of Mestiza consciousness illustrates the fluidity of the self that is founded on self-invented values and laws. The book, therefore, reflects this independence-oriented Mestiza philosophy and 'behaves' accordingly. In other words, the writing style embodies a mirror image of the unbridled, limit-free Mestiza consciousness; *Borderlands* is a materialization of Anzaldúa's mental construction of the personal (and collective) identity.

Second, the authoress disputes Western academy-derived theory for she finds it restraining and also ignorant of her position of a marginalized writer. She contests the deletion by the dominant culture from a socially inferior standing. This position serves as an impulse that consequently provides soil for an alternative type of theory construction. Hector A. Torres argues that under an imperative of this sort "the minority writer produces a theory that is much more readable but not any less rigorous, precisely because the 'fit' between fact and theory, description and explanation, life and text is more immediate in terms of the political context in which that theory or explanation is written."⁹

By contrast, the official or 'high theory' that proceeds from the educational establishment employs exclusively abstract language and focuses on objectivity. Any autobiographical details are expunged from the academic text. Also contemporary theory is highly specialized and routinely involves sophisticated terms, specific-meaning systems, and complex, intertextual references.

⁸ Ikas, Karin Rosa. "Gloria Anzaldúa: Writer, Editor, Critic, and Third-World Lesbian Women-of-Color Feminist" in: Ikas, Karin, ed. *Chicana Ways: Conversations with Ten Chicana Writers*. Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2002, p. 6.

⁹ Torres, Hector A. "In Context: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera*: The New Mestiza" in: Braum, Harold Augen and Olmos, Margarite Fernández, ed. *U.S. Latino Literature: A Critical Guide for Students and Teachers*. New York: Greenwood Press, 2000. p. 124, (emphasis his).

This results in a division of the reader- and writer-communities and may cause an abysmal discrepancy between the insider/outsider knowledge which implies potential impediment to social and/or economic advancement.¹⁰

Anzaldúa is convinced that professional jargon as well as abstract theorizing can worsen the writer-reader communication and lead to mutual alienation. Anzaldúa goes against the fixed genres and produces writing which is to be personal and accessible to all readers. She constructs a theoretical framework of her own which enables her to articulate the lived experience of a minority writer: she makes an attempt to translate what would normally be a dense, theoretical writing into practical terms which have the ability to convey the experiences of self-identified women, lesbians, and other previously ignored minorities.¹¹

Writing, for Anzaldúa, possesses transformative powers. So does theory. Keating writes that conventional theories and belief systems often "contain hidden biases privileging restrictive gender, ethnic, sexual, and class norms" and that it is vital people find open political theories that "simultaneously expose these hidden biases and offer alternative perspectives."¹² This view sums up the purport of Anzaldúa's theory.

The following lines in Anzaldúa's own words summarize her call for new types of theories that re-interpret and revise existing belief systems. Anzaldúa's aims to correlate *Borderlands/La Frontera* with her theory:

Theory produces effects that change people and the way they perceive the world. Thus we need *teorías* that will enable us to inter-

¹⁰ Keating, AnaLouise. *Women Reading Women Writing: Self-Invention in Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. p. 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.

pret what happens in the world, that will explain how and why we relate to certain people in specific ways, that will reflect what goes on between inner, outer and peripheral “I”s within a person and between the personal “I”s and the collective “we” of our ethnic communities. *Necesitamos teorías* that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kind of theories with new theorizing methods.¹³

The book’s hybrid form illustrates Anzaldúa’s new theorizing methods through the weaving pattern applied to the writing process: autobiography precedes historical narrative which is followed by poetry—which, in *Borderlands*, is highly autobiographical. Further, the shifts in genres are supported by shifts in registers and switching across her English, Spanish, and other languages.

To provide evidence for the hybrid style of the book, one may focus, for example, on the opening chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera* titled “The Homeland, Aztlán: El otro México.” It commences with a Mexican poem, then a brief introduction on the indigenous people unfolds in a sociological and geographical essayist style. An extensive poem written in both English and Spanish follows portraying the ambiguities of life on the U.S./Mexican border. The genre used for the description of the situation in the Rio Grande region then alters: an essay ensues. A depiction of an autobiographical experience with the migrant people is included next to be subsequently sustained by historical data. Thus various genres and different languages form the Aztec weaving pattern of writing which is

¹³ Anzaldúa, Gloria. “Preface” in: G. Anzaldúa, ed. *Op. Cit.* p. xxv.

the pervasive compositional strategy of the book. Diane Freedman argues that Anzaldúa’s writing from and through borders “results in an unbounded fecundity, a powerful, poetic hybrid where the personal, poetic and political are joined... [It is] a self-expressive literature of mosaics and margins [which] defy dominant culture’s ‘voice of order.’”¹⁴

EXPERIENCING THE WRITING PROCESS: THE SHAMANISTIC AND HEALING QUALITIES OF WRITING

For silence to transform into speech, sounds and words, it must first traverse through our female bodies.¹⁵ (Gloria Anzaldúa)

Anzaldúa is persuaded that the female body is a gateway through which a woman can access her language. The epigraph above indicates the central position female corporality attains in women’s political assertion of the right to voice their overlooked subordinate standing within the society and culture. Anzaldúa’s focus is on dismissing the compulsory tradition of silence that has cornered women in minority cultures through the cultural, sexual and linguistic oppressions. She believes that creative processes—especially writing—possess such transformative powers that not only women’s identity but also their immediate reality may witness a profound change. By writing, an authoress can gain a

¹⁴ Freedman, Diane P. “Writing in the Borderlands: The Poetic Prose of Gloria Anzaldúa and Susan Griffin” in: Perry, Linda M., Turner, Lynn and Sterk, Helen, ed. *Constructing and Reconstructing Gender: The Links Among Communication, Language and Gender.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. p. 211, (emphasis hers, parenthesis mine).

¹⁵ Anzaldúa, Gloria. “Preface” in: Anzaldúa, Gloria, ed. *Making Face Making Soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color.* San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990. p.xxii.

thorough perspective of her inner self, can achieve autonomy and most importantly, can discover how the dominant culture has devalued her personality.

Throughout all her work, Anzaldúa shows how women's potential of developing self-affirmative forms of expression, such as speaking and writing, has been inhibited by the Western culture's favoring of the masculine. As a result, a woman is defined by male desire and "the female body has been objectified, appropriated, marginalized and repressed in and by phallogocentric language systems."¹⁶

This significantly influences women's view of themselves; any reference to their selves as well as their identity and sensuality is inevitably carried out in accordance with the male-defined standards. The absence of female-identified language violates women's ability to word their utter experience in a satisfactory way, i.e. in a manner that would fully correspond and reflect females' experience and at the same time would not hinder their attempt at expressing themselves totally. "It is difficult to speak from/through our bodies because they have been stolen, brutalized or numbed," argues Anzaldúa in a preface to *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*.¹⁷

The path to discovering an adequate modus of female-oriented discourse bears no insurmountable obstacles for women. They must, so urges Anzaldúa, reclaim their stolen bodies and let their embodied experience resonate through their flesh. "It's not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue—organic writing, I call it," says the writer.¹⁸ To Anzaldúa, body and text are

one.

AnaLouise Keating implies that women's body-writing can mediate new forms of knowledge because such creation employs resources that cannot be controlled, not even by the writer herself. The bodily component used in the quest for comprehension of their selves alters women's view of their bodies. The female body (and a woman too) should no longer be understood as the other, as the stranger, as "the one closer to the undivine."¹⁹ Women should learn to value and recognize the carnal within their experience and their writing should reflect this new dimension.

It is generally believed that females tend to perceive their experience through emotions, as well as through intuition and instincts. These irrational components of grasping the reality have been disparaged by the hegemony of Cartesian knowledge that elevates the conceptual approach to the world over the corporeal; in other words, it denies the feminine knowledge its validity. Therefore, as Keating speaks of the possibility of inventing a new, nonphallic, kind of knowledge, "the development of female-identified voices, bodies and texts breaks apart this [Cartesian] gendered binary structure, providing [thus] a significant challenge to existing knowledge systems."²⁰

Anzaldúa believes that culture can be changed from within because body-writing grants self-identified women new tactics for political intervention and social change. Anzaldúa's female writer, a *mujer magica*, acquires through her body new modes of perception and then transmits these into her actions.

Abstract thought and the guidance of academic erudition are, in Anzaldúa's Mestiza view, no significant factors in literary creation; on the very contrary, she encourages oppressed women of color to dispose

¹⁶ Keating, *Op. Cit.* p.118.

¹⁷ Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Preface" in: G. Anzaldúa, ed. *Op. Cit.* p. xxii.

¹⁸ Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers" n: Anzaldúa, Gloria and Moraga, Cherrie, ed. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983. p. 172.

¹⁹ Anzaldúa, *Op. Cit.* p. 39.

²⁰ Keating, *Op. Cit.* p.119.

of the norms indoctrinated by Western culture's educational system and produce writing free of any pre-constructed tenets. "Throw away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel your way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked—not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat."²¹

In putting such a stringent emphasis on the inclusion of materiality in the creating process, Anzaldúa forbears, however, a major constituent of writing; she neglects the quality of the literary piece. Excluding the academic restrictions from the process of creation does not necessarily imply an alleviation of the artistic value of a work. Yet, the aesthetics of the writing and its quality do not seem to be Anzaldúa's main objective.

Nonetheless, in the interview²² with Karin Ikas, Anzaldúa does admit that the reader's response is important to her and therefore she must strive for aesthetic qualities in her books and—since she resists all prescribed theoretical limitations—maneuver between what is still acceptable to the readers and what goes beyond.

Anzaldúa's overriding of the artistic qualities as comprehended by the Western culture has two motives that are closely linked:

First, indigenous people never separate aesthetic qualities of a piece of art from its religious, social and/or functional purposes. Creation for mastery's sake leads to the objectification of the work, which is a trait representative of the Western culture, argues Anzaldúa. She refers to her Indian past and thus on purpose dismisses the dictate of the Western aesthetics. She wishes to treat a work of art "not just as an object but

also as a person." To her, the value of a piece of art lies in the energy it can radiate and the live and active powers it carries. These powers have the capacity to initiate a change not only in the observer (or a reader) but also in the artist (writer) herself. Such art is "dedicated to the validation of humans."²³ Writing can perform a change.

Second, Anzaldúa ascribes healing traits to the process of writing. This feature seems to have been the principal impetus for her literary as well as theoretical accomplishment. The authoress associates the writer with the shaman and the purpose of writing is then made obvious: finding a cure for the residues of trauma faced by an oppressed woman. The medicine is to be looked for within the female body which is burdened with the traumatic experience. The writing process represents the healing agent through which the medicine is then administered. The quality of a piece of writing lies first of all in its therapeutic potential. The aesthetic content, so enforced in the Western arts, is in Anzaldúa's perspective secondary.

The metaphorical analogy of a writer being a shaman is the central and most important notion in Anzaldúa's literary works; it is a topic which Anzaldúa never allows to pass unmentioned in her essays on literary production. An essay which explicitly deals with the shaman-writer parallel was published after first theoretical reactions to *Borderlands/La Frontera* appeared. In "Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman," Anzaldúa re-conceptualizes Aztec metaphysical beliefs that used to be associated with the shaman's role within the indigenous society. The authoress transfers the ancient shamanistic tradition into the present situation and incorporates the idea into her theoretical thought.

The shaman—the Aztec *nahual*—was to preserve and create the cultural or the communal identity and function as a mediator

²¹ Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers" in: Anzaldúa, Gloria and Moraga, Cherrie, ed. *Op. Cit.* p. 173.

²² Ikas, *Op. Cit.* p. 7.

²³ Anzaldúa, *Op. Cit.* p. 89-90.

between the cultural heritage of the past and present. Nowadays, Anzaldúa employs the shamanistic features in her Mestiza-consciousness-defined aesthetics. Further she argues, in Keating's words, that "tribal cultures' shamanistic traditions represent the development of sophisticated, well-integrated aesthetic, religious, and political systems," and thus seeks to shatter the Western culture's approach to these practices as pagan, superstition-based cults.²⁴

How does Gloria Anzaldúa then use the shamanistic metaphor in her works? In the beginning of Anzaldúa's writing, there must be an upsetting and/or painful emotion emitted from within her body; from this impulse, unconsciously, an image is derived. Since an image is "more direct and more immediate than words," it bridges the gap between the evoked feeling and knowledge. Afterwards, the sensation is verbalized: "picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness."²⁵

It has been argued that for Anzaldúa the body is a fundamental agent present in the process of writing and that writing, being a shamanistic endeavor, is expected to release healing powers. Therefore it follows that the impulses that force Anzaldúa to write involve intense physical and psychic pain—essential ingredients in the writing experience.

In order to gain the ability to see the way in which the healing *nahual* has been built into *Borderlands/La Frontera*, one must decipher the three components of the overall 'medical' treatment:

First, Anzaldúa strives to understand the origins of an 'illness' and the pattern in which it "unbalances a person or a community" and spreads as "a form of disease, or disinformation/misinformation perpetrated on women and people of color." Second,

Anzaldúa searches for the cure that "leads to a change in the belief system." Third, she acknowledges the healer: integrating the tradition of the shaman into her writing allows Anzaldúa to take the advantage of the performative effects of language. Thus not only can she reinvent her personal identity but she can also reinvent her immediate reality and that of her readers as well.²⁶

An even more self-explanatory parallel to the therapeutic service the book *Borderlands/La Frontera* embodies can be offered: the 'illness' to be treated is represented by "una herida abierta, the 1,950 mile-long open wound dividing a pueblo." In other words, the U.S./Mexican border is the disease. Relief or cure can be achieved through writing the body and the soul, i.e. through inventing the New Mestiza. The doctor is the authoress herself; "writing heals me [and] brings me great joy."²⁷

Although writing delivers an improvement in the physical and/or psychic state, Anzaldúa compares the writing process to undergoing an immense danger; a mental barrier that must be overcome. The creative process, to Anzaldúa, represents a source of anxiety for she never knows what depths of her self she might uncover. "To write is to confront one's demons, look them in the face and live to write about them...yet, in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power."²⁸

²⁶ Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman" in: *Conversant Essays: Contemporary Poets on Poetry*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990. p. 99. This essay was published eight months after *Borderlands/La Frontera* "hit the bookstores." For more on the shamanistic tradition in Anzaldúa see: Steele, Cassie Premo. *We Heal from Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldúa, and the Poetry of Witness*. New York: Palgrave, 2000, p. 86-90.

²⁷ Anzaldúa, *Op. Cit.* p. 24-25 and 92.

²⁸ Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers" in: Anzaldúa, G. and Moraga, C., ed. *Op. Cit.* p. 171.

²⁴ Keating, *Op. Cit.* p.135.

²⁵ Anzaldúa, *Op. Cit.* p. 91.

CODE-SWITCHING

Earlier in this essay I have demonstrated that Anzaldúa's style is one of a medley of genres: the text of *Borderlands* is interspersed with prose and verse, autobiographical testimonials shift to academic essays on history, legends and myth-making go hand in hand. The genre of the book continually resists stasis. Such an intentional design thus transgresses the standard conventions of literary production for Anzaldúa strives to vanquish the limitations set by literary theory in her quest for ideal means of expression and conveyance of the Mestiza philosophy.

Lois Zamora is highly supportive of Anzaldúa's style-blending that contributes to the perfection of *Borderlands*' message:

[Anzaldúa] con/fuses the complementary impulses to record and to imagine, creating brilliant mixtures of myth, history, and the remembered past...[where] autobiography and fiction naturally overlap and invade each other's usual territory...It is a matter of finding a voice or style that does not violate one's several components of identity.²⁹

Multiple identity, multiple genres. There is, however, another element in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* that can be invested with the adjective 'multiple' and that is the optics of the writer. In other words, Anzaldúa has taken advantage of her placement between borders: she has been searching for both her selfhood and culture within the dominant Anglo society as well as within the marginalized Chicano commu-

²⁹ Zamora, Lois Parkinson. "Introduction: Moveable Boundaries—Public Definitions and Private Lives" in: Zamora, Lois Parkinson, ed. *Contemporary American Women Writers: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*. New York: Longman, 1998. p. 6, (parenthesis mine).

nity. Having operated along these moveable boundaries, Anzaldúa is infused with an alternative insight—or the *Coatlícue* state as she calls it. It is a 'rupture in everyday sensing.'³⁰ The authoress therefore possesses a capacity of innovative viewing and interpreting her immediate reality.

How does she transmit the multiplicity of her perspective via the text? What tools does she employ? Code-switching, besides variations in genre, is another technique the authoress deploys in order to convey the philosophy of the Mestiza and to heal from her oppressed and underprivileged past.

In *Borderlands* there are two models according to which the technique of switching codes can be analyzed. First, it involves switching between English and Spanish (and other of Anzaldúa's reclaimed languages). Second, it pertains to abrupt shifts between first and third person narration.

For an oppressed Mestiza dwelling in the region of a dividing line, the ability to speak in many tongues becomes the primary survival mechanism. Linda Nelson furthers this idea: "Switching codes, switching languages, is necessary when the dominant culture insists on one language, one color, two genders, one sexuality."³¹

Anzaldúa makes transitions from taught standard English to acquired working-class English to native Chicano Spanish or to Tex-Mex. She frequently does so even in the middle of a sentence or a poem, thus claiming all languages as equal. Yet, each of the languages is used for different occasions; each refers to a different culture and portrays different events. Each language also implies a different value system. From the mutual combination of the languages

³⁰ Anzaldúa, *Op. Cit.* p. 68.

³¹ Nelson, Linda. "After Reading: Borderlands/La Frontera" in: *Trivía*. New Amherst: Spring 1989, p. 95. For more on code-switching see also: Steele, Cassie Premo. *We Heal from Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldúa, and the Poetry of Witness*. New York: Palgrave, 2000, p. 52.

deployed in *Borderlands* a 'borderland language' emerges. In the preface to the second edition Anzaldúa claims:

The switching of codes in this book from English to Castilian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these, reflects my language, a new language—the language of the Borderlands. There at the juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized; they die and are born.³²

In *Borderlands* Chicano Spanish is mostly used in the depiction of emotional distress or when a special emphasis is put on historical facts that entail the cultural oppression of all indigenous people and/or Chicanos/Chicanas. Cultural terminology is solely referred to in Chicano Spanish e.g. *maquiladoras*—factories owned by American conglomerates where especially Mexican immigrants are employed and paid minimal wages; *pochos*—an anglicized Spanish-speaking Mexican whose accent is characteristic of North Americans and who distorts his Spanish under the influence of English; *mojados*—“wetbacks,” Mexican immigrants who reached the U.S. by having waded through the Rio Grande from *del otro lado*—the other side, a term Chicanos use when referring to that part of their homeland which is governed by Mexico.³³

To illustrate the differentiated treatment English and Chicano Spanish are given and the hidden meanings these languages can contain, an example can be traced in the second chapter “Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan” (Movements of Rebellion and Cultures That Betray). The chapter opens with a lengthy passage that questions the domi-

nant position of men over women within the Chicano community; a cultural trait that Anzaldúa radically dismisses. The writer chronicles her increasing awareness of the cultural hindrances that are posed in front of her (and other Chicanas) as she is coming of age: through the initial obedience and silent acceptance a rebellion surfaces. “I have grown. I no longer spend my life dumping cultural customs and values that have betrayed me. I have also gathered time proven customs...that respect women.”³⁴

The section is written in un-translated Chicano Spanish and as Saldívar-Hull suggests, “serves as a proclamation of independence for the mestizas bound within a male-dominated culture.”³⁵ Intentionally, the passage addresses the Chicano men and male-identified women—those who help to keep alive the oppressive traditions that circulate continually in the community—in Spanish. Anzaldúa’s use of the native tongue implies a speech towards the tribe’s elders—the bearers of wisdom and knowledge who have the power of reshaping the rules of the community and who might thus better comprehend the speaker’s (writer’s) concerns. The declaration, however, ends in English—the dominant culture’s language which at the same time is the language of Anzaldúa’s feminist assertion and the language in which the Mestiza philosophy is formulated. Anzaldúa’s bilingual strategy may denote her plan to confront the Chicano representatives in the language intrinsic to her cultural tradition, although they certainly may be fluent English speakers.³⁶

The title of *Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza* itself, being partly English and

³⁴ Anzaldúa, *Op.Cit.* p. 37, (translation by Sonia Saldívar-Hull).

³⁵ Saldívar-Hull, Sonia. “Introduction to the Second Edition” in: Anzaldúa, *Op.Cit.* p. 3-4. Saldívar-Hull provides a translation of the passage discussed.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

³² Anzaldúa, *Op. Cit.* p. 20.

³³ Anzaldúa, *Op. Cit.* p. 32, 33, 78. Chicanos tend to drop the ‘d’ vowel in some Spanish words, for instance in ‘lado’ as spelled above.

partly Spanish, suggests a notion of a dividing line; both the book and its language contain a collection of opposites, counterparts and ambiguities. To find the true meaning of Anzaldúa's words and ideas one has to read between the lines knowing that every line, at least optically, represents another border. Does Anzaldúa succeed in explicating her identity-politics to her readership even though her 'borderlands tongue' involves mainly Germanic and Romance languages, both of which sprang up from different traditions?

A reader who does not speak Spanish may possibly find himself/herself at the very same loss that Anzaldúa, as a representative of a misunderstood and marginalized people, faces on regular basis. By having mingled the two languages, Anzaldúa literally forces her readers to undergo an experiment:

First, they witness the shared Chicano experience of perpetual miscomprehension of their cultural heritage which the dominant culture fails to recognize as appealing or at least as justified in its search for roots.

Second, Spanish non-speakers also endure the potential frustration suffered by the Chicano people that must have followed instantaneously after the U.S. annexation of the Aztlán territory: the Mexican mestizos did not then speak English.

Nevertheless, such readers' inability to understand all of Anzaldúa's words does not necessarily impair the writer's attempt at conveying her experience in an effective, although unique, manner. The authoress has simply avoided linguistic means in the portrayal of her lived experience and has rather created a genuine sensation of a not-being-understood feeling directly in her readers. In other words, Anzaldúa teaches her readers by exerted and individually-lived, therefore active, perception that is being imposed on the audience while reading *Borderlands*; she does not use conventional demonstrative and/or narrative methods which do not encourage the readers to par-

ticipate actively in experiencing the writing in such an extensive degree as the strategy employed.

Gloria Anzaldúa thus re-creates her readership as she forces her audience, along with herself, to question the dominant culture's practices and as she enlivens her personal experience in her readers. Anzaldúa's numerous passages on writing contained in the book express her belief, that writing, as well as reading, are influential creative processes that significantly influence the artist's and the readership's psyches and bodies. The border between the creator and the targeted recipient of the message is then dissolved—both sides share a mutual commonality: they are affected by the work and possibly changed. As Monika Kaup writes of Anzaldúa's narrative strategy: "It is to combine and entangle subject and object positions in cultural narration, a style that does away with closed-off, bordered positions of neutral knowers and of cultural actors."³⁷ In Anzaldúa's view artistic creation is not a mere materialization of ideas; it is above all a mental and physical experience which carries therapeutic qualities.

Having explicated the first type of code-switching, i.e., the alternation of English and Spanish, let us proceed to the second technique: shifts in first and third person narration.

Changes in the perspective from which she speaks in the work enable Anzaldúa to record the simultaneous shaping of both her personal as well as collective identity: of a self-defined Anzaldúa as a mestiza 'living' her self-invented Mestiza consciousness, i.e. multiple, all-embracing, ever-shifting identity; and of Anzaldúa defined

³⁷ Kaup, Monika. "Crossing Borders: An Aesthetic Practice in Writings by Gloria Anzaldúa" in: Siemerling, Winfried and Schwenk, Katrin, ed. *Cultural Difference & the Literary Text: Pluralism & the Limits of Authenticity in North American Literatures*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996. p. 106.

by Western terms as a queer, lesbian, woman-of-color writer/poet/critic, a member of the underprivileged Chicano ethnic group and a graduate of an American university who acknowledges her multiple cultural roots.

By shifting first and third person narration the writer places herself in the role of a speaker voicing concerns of multitudes—sexual, racial, cultural minorities. The authoress says about her masterpiece:

I don't feel that I, Gloria, produced *Borderlands* all by myself. I just happen to be the mouthpiece, the channel. While I do feel that the images and words...the way that I speak...the structure and style are mine, I found the raw material out there in the world, in other people's experiences, and in books.³⁸

How does Anzaldúa employ this code-switching technique in the book? Let me provide an example. In the first chapter the opening poem on geography and history of the troubled Rio Grande border includes a stanza describing Anzaldúa's painful balancing on the dividing line. The authoress writes:

This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire.

Having introduced the general, text-book-like history of the region, Anzaldúa directs her attention to the overlooked—to people whose fates are not catalogued in any official version of history. The closing paragraphs of the chapter describe the economic exploitation of a representative female refugee *la mojada, la mujer indocumentada* as she seeks to support her Mexican family by working illegally in the U.S. Being threatened with deportation, such a

³⁸ Torres, *Op. Cit.* P. 125.

woman commonly becomes a prey of victimization. Risking her health, this economic refugee “leaves the familiar and safe homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain.”³⁹ Thus Anzaldúa's poem from the beginning of the chapter changes in the final lines:

This is her home
this thin edge of
barbwire.

No longer does Anzaldúa narrate her personal story. Replacing “my” with “her” implies the writer's acceptance of a multiple voice and also her identification with the doomed experience of the oppressed woman.

Moreover, this “her” does not refer to the story of the above described illegal trespasser solely. “She” is a vicarious embodiment of all oppressed and marginalized women whose experiences Anzaldúa aims to ventilate and incorporate within a liberating principle—the Mestiza consciousness.

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³⁹ Anzaldúa, *Op. Cit.* p. 35. Poems quoted from p. 25 and p. 35.

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