theories and methodologies

Anzaldúa and Transnational American Studies

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FOR SEVERAL YEARS NOW, AT LEAST SINCE THE 2000 CENSUS, THE UNITED STATES HAS IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER TOLD ITSELF THAT IT needs to come to terms with what it means to live in a country of over forty million Latinos/as. Latina actors grace the covers of *People* magazine, Latin beats percolate through the earbuds of iPods, and McDonald's serves up breakfast burritos alongside its McMuffins. In the academic world, the increasing consciousness of the Latino/a presence in the United States means that it is now unthinkable for any major university not to have a program of studies focusing on the histories and cultures of this ill-defined population; it means border theory is increasingly present on our syllabi; and it means that we all nod our heads wisely when the name "Gloria Anzaldúa" is mentioned. For years before her untimely death, Anzaldúa complained bitterly about being "repeatedly tokeni[zed]" ("Haciendo Caras" xvi), as one of the same half dozen women continually called on as a resource for academic collaboration. Being a token meant that she saw clearly how she was both overhyped and treated less than seriously; worse, she felt drained of the energy that would allow her to continue her literary and political work.

For most of us, Gloria Anzaldúa first made her presence forcefully known through a 1983 activist collection coedited with Cherríe Moraga. In a second-wave feminist academic world, students and scholars concerned about hearing women of color's voices carried around our tattered copies of *This Bridge Called My Back* almost as secret club membership badges, and more than one student referred to that powerful collection of poems, essays, and sui generis personal writings as "the bible" (I'm sure I did so myself). Anzaldúa followed up this edited work with her pathbreaking single-author book, *Borderlands / La Frontera.* A spiritual and poetic personal meditation on United States mestizo identity, it was, as anyone reading these pages knows well, published nearly a generation ago, and since its appearance in 1987 has had a profound effect on many areas of academic inquiry: American, feminist, ethnic, composition, and

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culture studies; queer, postcolonial, border, and Euroamerican high theory. She has been cited alongside (and frequently by) scholars like Homi Bhabha, Enrique Dussel, Edouard Glissant, Walter Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, Mary Louise Pratt, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Immanuel Wallerstein, and if in the twenty-first century there is more attention in the United States academy to "border thinking" and *nepantilismo*, it can be largely credited to her inspiration. As Anzaldúa's fellow El Paso Chicana Alicia Gaspar de Alba writes in her eulogy–open letter, "The way I see it, your border theories have provided a model for Americanist scholarship of the twenty-first century and a foundation for thinking and writing about the multiple histories, languages, genders, and racial realities that are converging in that great big cornfield of 'American' life and culture" (vi–vii).

Yet for all the undeniable influence and importance of Anzaldúa, there is a strained quality to much of the discussion around her work. Her most acute critics are often those who know her best and who come from the same South Texas background. She is too brash, too essentialist, not quite rigorous, not theoretical enough; her thinking, while grounded in her personal experience as a Chicana lesbian feminist from the southwest of the United States, is nevertheless too abstract—it is, as Pablo Vila and others have pointed out, too utopian for a concrete reality that has always been informed more by border enforcers than border crossers. The Mexican scholar María-Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba comments that Anzaldúa's transnational projections are likewise too limited and constrained by an exclusively United States understanding of the Mexican-American border region and its inhabitants, strangely omitting any concrete reference to Mexican scholars or the Mexican side of the border despite continually evoking its metaphoric presence. Benjamin Alire Saenz adds that her book has cemented a dangerously escapist romanticization of indigenous cultures, offering little of practical value to today's urban Chicanos/as (85–86). These reasoned evaluations, contributed in a spirit of the utmost respect for Anzaldúa's early accomplishments, have served as formative texts, helping Chicano/a studies develop a vigorous and thoughtful academic presence. Frustratingly enough, these further developments often seem to be ignored by the dominant-culture academic establishment, which all too frequently falls back on the iconic image rather than the more nuanced work.

Last year, Shelley Fisher Fishkin dedicated her American Studies Association presidential address to Anzaldúa. To anchor her critique of an inexcusably parochial version of American studies, Fishkin uses a concrete example, opening "Crossroads of Cultures" with an allusion to a book she had been in the process of preparing for Oxford University Press. When she insisted on including Anzaldúa as among the most important writers of the twentieth century in one of the many volumes she had prepared for this press, Oxford balked: "not appropriate for our target audience, they said. In the end, I withdrew the book" (18).

Fishkin's anecdote has a bittersweet quality, a combination of militancy and special pleading that seems all too familiar in discussions of the Chicana writer, and as such serves as an exemplary point of departure for the rest of this brief note. The point of this exercise is not to refute Fishkin, whose work I respect and whose position seems to me an admirable one, but merely and more modestly to point out how the common tokenizing of Anzaldúa occurs at the hands not just of her critics but also of her friends, to the detriment of both the scholar and the source text. Academic enthusiasms and political commitments can trip us up, especially when dealing with controversial thinkers like Anzaldúa, whose work is essential but has been persistently underread.

In Fishkin's fable, Oxford University Press, one of the grand symbols of The Institution,

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with all its attendant prestige and historical gravitas, is weighed and found wanting, as it is inconceivably still invested in a "sanitized version of American literature" unacceptable to serious scholars today (18). The members of the ASA hearing or reading this address are meant to be appalled in the same way as Fishkin; in the same way—perhaps—as we are appalled by highly publicized reports of school board efforts to ban *Huckleberry Finn* or *Catcher in the Rye* from libraries. United States literature, implicitly, is stronger, richer, more interesting when presented in its multilingual, multicultural complexity, with all its tensions and contradictions, with all its transnational connections. She writes:

> Today, American Studies scholars increasingly recognize that the understanding requires looking beyond the nation's borders, and understanding how the nation is seen from vantage points beyond its borders. At a time when American foreign policy is marked by nationalism, arrogance, and Manichean oversimplification, the field of American Studies is . . . a place where borders within and outside the nation are interrogated and studied, rather than reified and reinforced. (20)

Anzaldúa, whose most famous work speaks centrally of borders and of the transnational flows of people and ideas, is fundamental to this project. At the same time, the nature of this address—an impassioned argument in favor of rethinking United States literature in terms of a transnational crossroads—betrays Fishkin's awareness that our imagined outrage is not as universal or as profound as she might hope. Meanwhile, in a running commentary, her footnotes remind the reader that the call for internationalizing American studies is already a well-established genre in the most familiar institutional circles, with a distinguished pedigree including some of the most recognized Caucasian as well as ethnic minority scholars in the field. It is curious, therefore, given two decades of calls for internationalization, that so little has changed, that Fishkin's address still has the urgency of a manifesto.

The evocation of Oxford serves an important rhetorical purpose, highlighting her concern with an entrenched institutional resistance, while creating some distance from the presumed and downplayed prejudices of a local United States audience and thus projecting the retrograde attitudes onto hidebound British traditionalism. Anzaldúa, whose rejection of Anglo audiences, except incidentally, and whose insistence on the particularities of her South Texas Chicana grounding make her the most local of writers, becomes the symbol of a valued transnationalism. Oxford, archetypically the most familiar and valued of transnational crossroads, our gateway to Europe, is recast as a provincial outpost. Anzaldúa versus Oxford; transnationalism versus insularity; academic openness versus unprofessional closed-mindedness; yet, at the same time, there is an unstated and uneasy reminder in the context of Fishkin's speech that Oxford's academic classism represents a comfortable snobbism, while Anzaldúa's ethnically described exclusivity makes her undeniably prickly for dominant-culture scholars. Her work, writes Anzaldúa, "does not address itself *primarily* to whites, but invites them to 'listen in' to women-of-color talking to each other and, in some instances, to and 'against' white people. . . . Mujeres-de-color speak and write not just against traditional white ways and texts but against a prevailing mode of being, against a white frame of reference" ("Haciendo Caras" xviii, xxii). While Anzaldúa at the end of her life seemed to slightly modify this stand—by welcoming like-minded men and white women as contributors in her final collection, *This Bridge We Call Home*—her fundamental position is clear: "Though tempted to retreat behind racial lines and hide behind simplistic walls of identity, las nepantleras know their work lies in positioning themselves—exposed and raw—in the crack between these worlds, and in revealing

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current categories as unworkable" ("Now" 567). Because the walls and the worlds and the categories that exclude women of color remain, *nepantleras* need to be vigilant about self-care, while seeking out coalitions. We academics like to forget that both Oxford and Anzaldúa reject most of us, most of the time.

Anzaldúa's politics do not allow for easy appropriation to dominant-culture progressive academic causes. Following a discussion of a quote from *Borderlands / La Frontera* about a confrontation with an immigration officer, Fishkin adjures her reader to "seek out the view from *el otro lado*" (23)—a confusing conflation of internal and international boundaries. Both "la migra" (the Immigration and Naturalization Service) and the fifth-generation Mexican American of Anzaldúa's story are, in a transnational perspective, from the same side of the border—the United States side. The whole point of the outrage about unjust deportation is that the deported United States citizen has no real knowledge of "el otro lado" and is just as unfamiliar with Mexico as any dominant-culture border dweller. Furthermore, in the highly charged exchanges between migration authorities and presumed undocumented workers, both are frequently of the same ethnicity as well. There is a slippage between this position and Fishkin's use of it. Fishkin urges scholars of United States history to seek out the Mexican perspective on the United States invasion of their country in 1847—a lesson that seems diametrically opposite to the one adduced in the anecdote that opens the discussion, since it would involve a real commitment to crossing the border and seeking out transnational (rather than intranational) collaboration.

These details from Fishkin's "Crossroads of Cultures" speech highlight the costs of tokenization, the way it leaches clarity from arguments. They also beg the central question she asks: what if we take Fishkin's charge seriously and look at Anzaldúa as an exemplar of transnational American studies? In Latin America, where "American studies" by definition is a transnational, continental area of inquiry, Anzaldúa is irremediably an iconic United States figure, not a transnational one. Her concept of the borderlands comes from a contestational United States position, one that looks south but does not cross the border. Anzaldúa herself would seem to agree. Her purview, she writes, is "what Reagan calls a frontline, a war zone. The convergence has created a shock culture, *a third country, a closed country*" (*Borderlands* 11; my emphasis).

Anzaldúa's discussion of this closed third country begins with Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Aztecs, a nomadic tribe that wandered from what is now the United States southwest to central Mexico, where they established the empire that was conquered by Hernán Cortés in 1519. In subsequent centuries, Spanish, mestizo, and indigenous conquerors then traveled back northward to the border area: "this constituted a return to the place of origin, Aztlán, thus making Chicanos originally and secondarily indigenous to the southwest" (*Borderlands* 5). From the Latin Americanist side of a transnational reading, this poetic genealogy with pre-Columbian Aztecs strikes no chord. Unlike the United States, in many parts of Latin America there are large contemporary indigenous populations, which in political circles are still largely ignored but who press continuously on the edges of official consciousness—a different quality from the United States politics around Native Americans. Anzaldúa celebrates the idea of "the new mestiza" who takes strength from her biculturality, whereas in Latin America the mestizo has a complicated and still largely unexplored history, involving abandoning native languages, food, religion, and so forth for Spanish.

To use the most apparently relevant Latin American context for Anzaldúa's work, "mestizo" in Mexico is a nation-building concept, not a resistant one, and a concept that often resolves in racialist usages by which

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assimilated mixed-blood people appropriate the right to speak for the indigenous elements of society. Attempts to bring together Latin Americans and United States Latinos/as frequently founder on this contradiction, these different ways of constructing ethnic identity, despite using the same term. In the United States, Spanish or Spanglish is the second-class language of the Indianizing mestizo (not, say, Nahuatl, the language still spoken by the indigenous people of central Mexico whose direct line of descent is from the Aztec peoples evoked in *Borderlands / La Frontera*); in Mexico, Spanish has the force of that country's official language. From a Mexican perspective, the Chicana manipulation of Aztec symbols, the Indianizing stance, would be nearly incomprehensible, if not rejected out of hand. In Mexican mestizo consciousness, except for the isolated solidarity actions in support of indigenous enclaves like the Zapatistas in Chiapas, there is a long-standing tendency to ignore the present, living Indians while speaking in their name.

When privately pressed on the point, colleagues in Latin America and especially in Mexico often find their interpellation into the discussions around Anzaldúa's work puzzling and somewhat uncomfortable. In a recent international conference, a well-placed senior Mexican scholar asked me if I had any ideas or strategies on how to include a discussion on Anzaldúa in an invited talk at a prestigious eastern university. This individual was specifically asked to address Anzaldúa's relevance to Mexican cultural studies, and after an assiduous reading of her work, my south-of-the-border colleague was still drawing a blank. When I suggested that the United States audience might well be receptive to a nuanced discussion of why this is so, in the context of an exploration of the cultural specificities of Mexican critical thought that inflect theory differently, the colleague responded, "I can't do that! I want to be invited back." Here, Gloria Anzaldúa most fully becomes that creature she herself feared: "Anzaldúa," the token Latina who distorts meaningful intellectual exchange.

There is another kind of systemic distortion in our institutional circles. Theory, for instance, has a higher validation quotient and thus greater value in the community for its ability, in Meaghan Morris's words, to extract "a cosmopolitan point of view from the most parochially constructed or ephemeral event" (6). Deploying Anzaldúa as a champion of transnational or any other theory distorts a project that has always been both larger and more local than The Institution. From an academic perspective she always seems, while inspirational, to fall a bit short on theory-side calibrations. However, Anzaldúa was always more about activism than academics, and her audience is a specifically targeted one, with the consequence that in academia she is systematically underread and her challenges to the Anglo establishment that has so eagerly taken her up are downplayed or ignored. Here is another take on the same author, this one by a twenty-year-old college student who read Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera* in one of her New York University classes (truth in advertising—the student is my daughter, Melissa):

> My entire class hated the piece. They felt alienated by the use of Spanish in the text. They were uncomfortable with Anzaldúa's aggressive style and use of violent imagery. They were offended by her attack on "Anglo oppressors" who had not allowed her to speak Spanish in school. They didn't get the importance of linguistic legitimacy. For me it was an awakening. I had always been embarrassed by my Spanish—a Spanish which was good enough to be called a "native speaker" by professors, yet poked fun at by my cousins in Mexico City. My first language, over the years, had become a painful reminder of acculturation—that I was a bad Mexicana, a gringa, a pocha. . . . On the inside, I felt like a failure.
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> But Anzaldúa, told me different.
>
> (Castillo-Carsow 1)

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Gloria Anzaldúa is, we need to recall, a poet as well as, more importantly than, a theorist. It is as poet that she continues to inspire some members of the next generation, even as she angers others. She is not and should not be all things to all people. "Don't give me your tenets and your laws," she writes. "Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures: white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to stanch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails" (*Borderlands* 22). The entire weight of her intellectual, personal, and spiritual journey is to provide a counternarrative to the lived story of betrayal and loss, to this culture of spiritual devastation. Learning from and about this alienation is one of the things meant by living in a country of forty million Latinos.

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