theories and methodologies

The Unassimilated Theorist

LINDA MARTÍN ALCOFF

GLORIA ANZALDÚA'S WORK INVITES US TO REACH BEYOND THE USUAL CONVENTIONS OF ACADEMIC WRITING TO MAKE VISIBLE THE RELATIONS between self and world, feeling and thinking, personal experience and theory. As a philosopher, I read her for her insights about and analyses of multiple oppression, mixed identities, and alternative epistemologies. But as another Latina trying to write theory, I read her as one dying for thirst chokes on the first gulp of water. Her fearless accounts of violence in the Chicano/a community, her unapologetic disclosures of her spiritual faith, and her belief in the theoretical value of the personal voice emboldened me to reveal parts of myself in my writing that had felt incongruous in the professional discourses of the academy, even in the supposedly anticonventional circles of feminist theory.

Anzaldúa was fully herself in her writing, unwilling to play the part of the assimilated Latina. Part of why it is difficult to be wholly yourself as a Latina or any woman of color in the academy is that so much of our daily work life involves white racism and cultural chauvinism. Airing honest opinions about these experiences can put one in jeopardy. If you don't have job security, you have to censor yourself constantly when asked ordinary questions, like "How was the conference?" or "What did you think of that paper?" or "How is your class going?" Anzaldúa did not self-censor, and she provided clear, strong, honest reflections on the real nature of what she experienced in the academy, in the movement, in daily life. She also refused to self-censor her Spanglish, a derided language that remains the mother tongue of many of us. Since she repudiated the need for institutional acceptance, hers was not a model we all could follow (if we needed health insurance for our children, for example). But she nonetheless presented an idea of how to write, how to publish, and how to theorize that we could learn from and be energized by.

Like Kafka, however, Anzaldúa's iconic status in feminism resulted in the contradiction of an iconoclast becoming the new standard. The status she attained in the nineties as the authentic voice of the multiply oppressed was often paradoxically used to provide

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an epistemological foundation for antifoundationalist, postmodern theories. In other words, her work was used to bolster some of the exclusionary and elitist theoretical fashions of the very institution that made her marginal. I worried not only about the effects of this on her personally but also about the effects on the reputation of her work. I thought of her situation as similar to the Che Guevara or Frida Kahlo problem of overexposure and commodification—serious engagement with their intellect seems to have decreased in proportion with their worldwide fame. In the latest Hollywood movie about Kahlo, viewers get zero information on what her political views were or what intellectual reasons she had for the themes of self-representation she chose in her work. If Anzaldúa was always read in Women's Studies 101 but rarely later on, a similar flattening out of her theoretical legacy is to be expected. Often cited, she remains undertheorized.

In reality, Anzaldúa's body of work is widely known only in a few circles. The story of her reception is complex. In women's studies, where she is required reading, she is too often exoticized as the voice of the authentic. In feminist theory, she is either used as expert authority or ignored, but she is rarely critiqued as a serious thinker should be. In Latino studies, she remains a maverick figure, unorthodox in style and content, and the themes of lesbian experience and feminism that she wrote about are still marginalized (Torres). In postcolonial theory, astoundingly, she is nearly unread, with a few important exceptions (e.g., Walter Mignolo).

Thus, despite a significant volume of work now in print and despite her wide renown in some spheres, Anzaldúa's effect remains to be developed. Too few have read more than *Borderlands / La Frontera* or *This Bridge Called My Back*. Too few have done a sustained critical analysis. It remains for those of us who believe there is a wealth of potential in Anzaldúa's work to bring it into current debates.

Although many aspects of her writings intrigue me, here I focus on just two: the conceptualization of *mestizahe*, and the use of the personal voice for doing theory. These themes reveal the unorthodox nature of her thought as well as its utility for certain fashionable trends in the academy today. Her positive articulation of *mestizahe* has been used to support the celebration of hybridity, even though her treatment of it is far from celebratory. Her use of the personal voice has been taken up as an example of situated knowing, which is a deservedly popular (though underarticulated) epistemological position. Yet I would also argue that the extent to which Anzaldúa validated personal experience contradicts the main currents in feminist and social theory, in which the move to authorize one's claims through invoking personal experience and one's social identity has been widely undermined.[1]

For Anzaldúa, just as for José Vasconcelos, the principal meaning of *mestizahe* is inclusivity. Mestizo peoples are better, Vasconcelos argued, because we are inclusive of more than one culture and way of being in the world. The multiple character of the hybrid makes for a stronger, more adaptable, and more resilient form than the vulnerable single-strand genealogy of the purebred. *Borderlands* is often read for its similarly hopeful portrayal of the mestiza's social positionality, as having an enhanced capacity for cultural translation and flexibility. In this way, the book supports a current trend that celebrates hybridity as the political and theoretical antidote to essentialism.

But in contrast to Vasconcelos, who was Mexican, Anzaldúa wrote as a Chicana living north of the border who experienced hybridity as a difficult and precarious political situation and psychic experience. The hybrid individual is marginalized everywhere, often vilified, and usually full of self-doubt. This is the main theme of *Borderlands / La Frontera*: the immense difficulties that Chicanas and Chicanos must endure because of their position between

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cultures and races. Contrast her account of mestiza consciousness with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's romanticized portrait of the nomad as a role model for deterritorialized subjectivity, a subjectivity freed from the being of identity into the becoming of possibility. Far from celebrating the lack of identity, Anzaldúa wrote, "The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza's dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness" (*Borderlands* 78).

Thus, *Borderlands / La Frontera* gives a detailed first-person phenomenology of how painful and difficult hybridity can be. Further, it proposes hypothetical explanations that link the insecurity of hybridity to various forms of violence. In particular, Anzaldúa worried that the shame and rootlessness of the mestizo can lead to excessive compensation, especially in the form of machismo:

> In the Gringo world, the Chicano suffers from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of self and self-deprecation. Around Latinos he suffers from a sense of language inadequacy and its accompanying discomfort; with Native Americans he suffers from a racial amnesia which ignores our common blood, and from guilt because the Spanish part of him took their land and oppressed them. He has an excessive compensatory hubris when around Mexicans from the other side. It overlays a deep sense of racial shame . . . which leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them. (*Borderlands* 93)

For Anzaldúa, the positive articulation of mestiza identity is a project to be undertaken, rather than something that already exists. Given the painfulness of hybridity, she argued that it is essential to provide some degree of coherence to avoid the incessant cultural collisions or violent compensations that result from the shame and frustration of self-negation. This project to achieve coherence also works against poststructuralist celebrations of incoherence. On Anzaldúa's view, incoherence is neither inevitable nor acceptable, but coherence will only be achieved through conscious effort and political struggle. Thus, Anzaldúa's description and analysis of mestiza consciousness is not at all in line with the postmodernist celebration of hybridity; the fact that she is used as support for this indicates that her work is not read carefully or critically enough.

Anzaldúa suggests that we can create a positive identity through seeing how the mestiza is engaged in the valuable though often exhausting role of border crosser, negotiator, and mediator between races and sometimes also between cultures, nations, and linguistic communities. The mixed person is a traveler often within her own home or neighborhood, translating and negotiating the diversity of meanings, practices, and forms of life. This vision provides a positive alternative to the mixed-race person's usual representation as lack or as the tragically alienated figure. Being mixed means having resources for communication and understanding that are vital for political movements.

Today, the idea of being mixed and having a hybrid identity may no longer seem to be the liability it was in the days of the "tragic mulatto." Being mixed has some political and cultural cachet, and the mixed person sometimes even enjoys an enhanced credibility in the white-dominant world. Yet the experiential difficulties of being mixed can persist in this new status and even be increased as we try to negotiate an unmerited credibility among whites. Whether Anzaldúa's analysis of the particularities of Chicana hybridity is applicable to hybrid identities generally or to hybrid identities specifically now, in the current climate of globalization, needs reflective analysis.

A second theme I would like to focus on in Anzaldúa's work is the political importance and theoretical legitimacy of the personal voice. Every text she wrote wove descriptive

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sociology, history, and political critique with recipes, personal narrative, poetry, dream images, and other unexpurgated elements of a lively intellect.

What does it mean that Anzaldúa's works emerged at the same time that the dominant trend in (white) feminist theory was trouncing the personal voice and the realm of personal experience as an invalid basis for knowledge of any sort? Refreshingly, Anzaldúa never defended her use of the personal against poststructuralist theory; she simply wrote in the way that she wanted, explaining and reflecting on her methods at times but without defensiveness or hesitation. In her view, theory necessarily begins with the body and the subjective experiences that only come in first-person form. The personal is unavoidable, ineliminable, carried everywhere the mind travels, even though, as Anzaldúa believed, the mind's imaginative capacities can travel far.

Anzaldúa's epistemology comes closest to that of Nietzsche, who wrote in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, "There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity,' be" (119; bk. 3, sec. 12). For Anzaldúa and Nietzsche, the presence of a particular and situated body is not always or simply a drag on theory (e.g., Anzaldúa, "Quincentennial" 178). The assumption that the body is a drag on theory—that the embodied experience of the personal realm will provide a drag of the particular against the attempts of the mind to develop universalizable theory—is present even in the feminist convention that we should own up to where we are speaking from. Owning up is necessary when our positionality is seen as always reducing validity, tempering universality, and lessening our credible claim to know the truth. Anzaldúa's view, like Nietzsche's, is that the body and its feelings are resource and motivation for theory:

> I do not believe that "distance" and "objectivity" alone help us come to terms with our issues. Distancing cannot be a major strategy—only a temporary breather. Total feeling and emotional immersion, the shocking drench of guilt or anger or frustration, wakes us up to some of our realities. . . . The intellect needs the guts and adrenaline that horrific suffering and anger . . . catapult us into. (Introduction xviii)

Anzaldúa allows that staying inside one's subjective positionality may limit what one can know, and she recommended at times the attempt to empathically imagine oneself as another and to stretch beyond the self's boundaries (e.g. *Borderlands* 1). But she also believed that a deliberately nonobjective strategy has major theoretical and political benefits. Feeling our feelings can clarify the nature of our reality, which is always a shared, interdependent reality. It also can galvanize us into doing the hard work that theory demands, to achieve understanding through a rigorous and unedited reflection on experience. Coming to see the truth, the truth of our oppression and humiliation, for example, or of another's fundamental discomfiture in our world, is often experienced as a kind of shock. Shock is not something looked for, expected, or desired, but comes on us without warning. Anzaldúa is thus describing the similarity between and interconnectedness of emotional and cognitive states, the multiple ways in which theory "change[s] people . . ." (Introduction xxv). This is strikingly in line with Nietzsche's embrace of the power of painful emotions as creative resources and strikingly at odds with his indifference to social oppression.

The personal is relevant for theory, on Anzaldúa's account, because of our tendency to live in what she called "'selective reality,' that narrow spectrum of reality that human beings select or choose to perceive and/or what their culture 'selects' for them to 'see'" (xxi). Perception is already interpreted and organized, and its manner of organization involves censoring. The possibility of becoming aware of

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and reflective about one's processes of censoring and interpretation requires bringing the personal in at full throttle. Anzaldúa believed in the possibility of change but that changing one's perceptual selectivity requires a change at the level of our soul or spirit, which will then bring our mind and body along. I find such claims absolutely consistent with every experience I have had in activism, in pedagogy, and in my personal life.

Anzaldúa was a pluralist about theory, theory making, and theoretical language, just as one might expect from a theorist of borderlands and hybridity. She thought the abstractions of high theory could be useful, even that distancing has its place, and she defended the legitimacy of a specialized language for theorists in the academy who need it in the same way other professionals do, whether they are doctors or seamstresses. Her complaint was that the academy did not support such pluralism. The ways she and many other women of color approached theory were too often delegitimated. First of all, the goal of our theory is to "change people and the way they perceive the world" (xxv). Reading this, I was struck by its contrast to Wittgenstein's dictum that philosophy should leave things just as they are (e.g., 49e; sec. 124). In his view, philosophical reflection should help to clarify the everyday life-world, and at the end of the day everything should stay just as it is. For Anzaldúa, in contrast, the goal of theory is revolution, and reflection is useful to the extent it leads to a disruption of the everyday. Her pluralism might counsel us to let Wittgenstein have his method, to acknowledge that he is operating in a different realm. But her theoretical efforts demanded a different outcome.

I suspect that Wittgenstein shared Anzaldúa's belief that the real work of the understanding occurs in the soul, but his strict separation of theoretical knowledge and moral understanding prohibited his ability to comprehend the seat of his brilliance. And thus it was circumscribed. Anzaldúa's abilities, thankfully, were not limited by an alienated self-understanding or a censored self-expression but only by the material limits put on her and her work by a hostile and uncomprehending Anglo culture.

Note

1. For support of this claim, see my papers "Merleau-Ponty" and "Politics."

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