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Into the Shadows of Identity: On Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

The concept of identity tends to exist today in an array of separate and distinct conversations. Topics such as gender, sexuality, culture, and ethnicity persist in their own spheres of discourse. This becomes problematic due to the fact that humans are complex beings, thus studying them in isolated categories results in inadequate generalizations; for instance, striving to make all encompassing claims about women as a monolithic group fails to take into account the ways in which women of different classes, ethnicities, and sexualities have very different experiences. The intersectionality of these social categories is important to consider when discussing the oppression and struggle that individuals face as a result of their identity, which is exactly what American author, Gloria Anzaldua, brings to light in her work titled *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* published in 1987. She builds a bridge between these conversations as she discusses the struggles she faces as a lesbian Mestiza woman in the borderland region of South Texas in the Rio Grande Valley. Anzaldua articulates the experience of a woman who straddles two male dominant cultures, devalued by each in different ways that impose inequality among women and outcasts those who are “different” (specifically, homosexuals) while also facing the racial oppression from a society that degrades individuals who do not associate themselves with the white community. This gendered perspective is underrepresented in the discourse of Mestiza identity, because as aforementioned, the

components of gender and sexuality tend to exist in their own distinct realms of discourse. Anzaldua breaks this barrier as she discusses the oppressions she faces as a woman, Mexican/American, and lesbian in a single conversation. The origin of these oppressions is rooted to both U.S. imperialism and Spanish Imperialism. It began with the Spanish invasion of Mexico which resulted in a high population of mixed Aztec Indian and Spanish blood. These mestizo ancestors then settled in the U.S. southwest where more intermarriage occurred between Mexicans, American Indians, and Spaniards, increasing the mixing, or "*mestizaje*," the term given by the Spaniards to those of mixed blood. Anzaldua explains that the Anglos then arrived and took this land from the indigenous who originally settled there, which consequently displaced families, and left individuals who remained stuck in the borderlands. While this history seems to only establish the issue of ethnic and racial distinctions, the underlying issues of oppression targeting gender and sexuality also persisted in the borderlands, however these additional forms of oppression had not been openly discussed at the time. Anzaldua reveals the consequences of both Spanish and U.S. imperialism that she personally faces as a result of her residence in the borderlands as a Mestiza who must combat the inequalities placed on women and rejection as a lesbian from both Mexican and American cultures as well as the adversity of not being fully white, or fully indigenous, looked down upon for her hybridity.

The intersectionality of Anzaldua's identity is vital to her new theory of Mestiza consciousness. She uses both poem and prose, integrates two different languages, and reappropriates terms throughout her book, which act as tools to help construct a reclaimed notion of Mestiza. Some questions that the texts raise are how is the term "mestiza" reappropriated and why is that re-appropriation important? How are the language and writing techniques of her work

utilized in challenging the old stigmas and in what ways does the text resist the oppressions of both male dominant societies on women and the degradation of mestizaje identity? Anzaldua challenges the cultural standards she has been expected to live up to as a mestiza. By encompassing all of these aspects of her identity into one conversation, she voices her complex position in society, which is underrepresented in the scholarly discourse of oppression, engendering a communal space for those in similar positions to relate. While she is proud of her heritage, she is openly critical of how her Mexican culture subjugates women and establishes inequality between them and men. Through structure and language, her book becomes a tool of re-crafting mestiza identity into a term that empowers women to critique and dispel the stigmas of inequality imposed upon them because of their gender, race, and sexuality.

In order to be able to understand Anzaldua's struggle as a mestiza and thereafter, her resistance to those adversities, we must understand the complexity of her identity. She brings into the conversation the topics of race, gender and sexuality as one realm. In order to discuss the significance of her identity, we must understand why these forms of oppression are best understood through examining their intersectionality. Laura Gillman, in her book titled *Unassimilable Feminisms*, expresses that these aspects do in fact directly affect one another in such a way that they cannot be discussed separately. In chapter two of her book, Gillman criticizes Susan Stanford Friedman's argument for unity and inclusivity within feminisms in order to dispel differences constructed from race. Friedman observes a so called "racial alibi" that is used by white feminists to victimize themselves by making feminists of color out to be accusers. Specifically, pointing out racial or social inequality and discrimination establishes an environment in which white women are unable to say anything about race because they are

white. It is Friedman's goal to dispel this and create an equal space of femininity and feminism where there is no place for the issue of race. Further advocating for this monolith of feminism, Friedman claims that white feminists are actually able to empathize with the paradigms faced by feminists of color such as hybridity, mestiza identity, and borderland theories. She claims that all races can relate to being different and suffer from similar oppressions. Gillman criticizes Friedman's attempt to create unity and assimilation between feminists and their struggles. She argues that Friedman's, "ensuing equivalence theory fails to take into account, however, that the liberatory processes that women of color have developed in order to shape their identities are not arbitrary, but rather pertain to particular lived realities of oppression that are simply not shared" (49). Gillman argues that feminism and gender adversities are not a problem that is universally shared by all women. Race must be taken into account since the experiences of women from their unique cultures shape their identity and cannot be empathized with by women of other cultures. This is important regarding Anzaldua as she discusses the struggle of being a mestiza in the borderlands, with regards to her race, gender, and sexuality, which could now be established to directly affect one another. As Gillman asserts, there is no generalization that can be made about her complexly constructed identity. In order to dive into a discussion of Anzaldua's identity, the struggles it presents, and her resistance, it must be understood how race and gender affect one another.

Focusing on the limitations of past scholars in their discussions of identity and adversity, Theresa A. Martinez reveals their failure to discuss all realms of what contributes to identity in her work titled, "The Double-Consciousness of Du Bois & The "Mestiza Consciousness" of Anzaldua." Martinez compares Black and Latino/a scholars through analyzing the works of both

W.E.B. Du Bois and Gloria Anzaldua, comparing both of their theories of consciousness. While she argues that the work of these two are related in representing oppression with regard to race, she also acknowledges that Du Bois' fails to acknowledge the effect of gender and sexuality whereas in Anzaldua's work they are thoroughly discussed. Martinez also points out that while Du Bois' work is well known, Anzaldua was only starting to get recognition. Through this discussion, Martinez reveals the limitations of well-known scholarly discourse regarding oppression as well as the struggle of women like Anzaldua to get recognition. Both Anzaldua and Du Bois' are minorities, demonstrating that there are additional repressions Anzaldua faces to gain credence as a scholar due to her identity as a Mestiza woman. Both Martinez and Gillman show proof that many scholars fail to consider the complexity of identity with regards to adversities. Gillman extends this by actively arguing that the bridge should be built, and analyzes the intersectionality between the various forms of oppression. This points out a limitation for Martinez as she acknowledges that Du Bois fails to participate in this discussion, but then herself fails to incorporate this intersectionality as she proceeds in her work to only discuss the oppressions both Anzaldua and Du Bois face regarding their race. Through this, the necessity of discussing the layers of identity become clear as well as witnessing firsthand the struggle that Anzaldua faces in not only trying to bring this subject to light, but also the limitations and oppressions that are imposed on her due to her complex identity to gain recognition.

John Sumanth Muthyala takes the conversation of intersectionality on that Martinez fails to produce in his article, "Roberta Fernández's 'Intaglio': Border Crossings and Mestiza Feminism in the Borderlands." He analyzes how women in these borderlands must break the stigmas imposed on them by their hegemonic cultures, fighting to refashion their identities and

reconstruct their gendered roles in society, clearly making a connection between gender and race. Muthyala claims that this reworking constructs a “feminist consciousness” which he defines as a bridge that, “seeks to make connections across the divides of race, culture, language, ethnicity, and nation.” Through retelling and analyzing the stories by Roberta Fernandez, Muthyala comments on the ability of these women to re appropriate their oppressed roles to retaliate against the patriarchal subjection imposed on them. One specific story that Muthyala comments on is where a woman named Veronica is raped by the boss of a migrant worker that she had been dating. Raping her was his way of demonstrating his superiority to his workers. Veronica is taken care of by women in her village through holistic practices. Muthyala argues that through this healing process, these women turned the domestic home space into a space for retaliation and resistance. These women began to take pride in their vocation and re appropriated a place, the domestic home, which was already deemed to them by this patriarchal society as a space for women, and transformed it into a place of pride and opposition. They used the oppressive institution imposed on them to refute the force that placed them there in the first place. By this observation, Muthyala brings to light a concept that is important for analyzing Anzaldua’s work. First he combines the concepts of race and gender into one conversation, analyzing the adversities placed on Mestiza women. In addition, he recognizes a strength that could come from this position, and through his analysis of re-appropriating the home as a place of their own pride, a connection forms between this and the way that Anzaldua re-appropriates various oppressive roles, terms, and institutions as part of her resistance. Muthyala not only discusses oppression through intersectionality, but offers ways that the oppressive role associated with mestiza identity can be transformed into a role that empowers women to resist their hegemonic cultures.

This reclamation of the identity of Mestiza women in response to the oppressive stigmas and limitations set upon them by their cultures, such that Muthyala presents, is exactly the same response that Anzaldua engenders in her work. Through both the language and structure Anzaldua illustrates the struggles that she faces and the ways in which she resists these oppressions. Before even analyzing any specific language in the book, we can look at the structure of the book to see how she purposely combines writing styles and language to produce a symbol of the mestiza. In the first chapter of the book, Anzaldua chooses to begin with a series of poems following typical prose paragraphs. Both are used to describe the borderlands, where the poems give a more personal and expressive perspective, and the prose offers a more formal and factual form of similar information. This is evident on page 3 that begins with a poem that describes the borderlands followed by a paragraph that further describes and defines the borderlands. The poem goes:

This is my home
 This thin edge of barbwire.
 But the skin of the Earth is seamless.
 The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.
 To show the white man what she thought of his arrogance
Yemaya blew that wire fence down.
 This land was Mexican once
 was Indian always
 and is
 and will be again.

In the paragraph directly following Anzaldua describes:

A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by an emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los Atravesados* live here...Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens...

The hybridity of both poem and prose is analogous to the mixed cultures that a mestiza straddles. There are lines that articulate the same message but with different meaning and different tones. In the paragraph Anzaldua says the borderland is an unnatural and vague boundary, in the poem she says the “skin of the Earth is seamless. The sea cannot be fenced.” Both express the artificial nature of the borderlands because it is a place that is constructed, with no real boundaries. The poem and the prose express similar feelings, in different but completely adequate ways. Even further, within these poems and paragraphs, Anzaldua makes a point to offer language in both English and Spanish, with no translation of either language for the other. In this way, the English speaking reader is placed in a position of uncertainty and cloudiness at some points depending on how much Spanish they speak. She re-creates that out of place feeling that a mestiza feels because they don't fully belong to one culture. For the reader who does not speak Spanish, they feel an unfamiliarity or confusion when the language is presented in the book, much like how those who are in between two cultures may be unfamiliar with certain customs, practices, or beliefs of either one, which creates sense of unbelonging and insecure position in society.

The experience of the mestiza established through the structure of the book is further amplified by the actual language, both figurative and literal, that Anzaldua uses. She begins by

defining and describing the physical place that is known as the borderlands and the emotions that are felt by the mestizos/as who live there. In chapter one Anzaldua describes the U.S. - Mexican border as, "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country- a border culture" (3). She creates this gruesome image of the borderlands as this open wound that is gushing blood, draining the life from two different worlds as they form a new one. In depicting the regions in such a way she brings forth the unnaturalness of this region and destruction that comes from it, further emphasized by her description of the two worlds grating against each other and hemorrhaging with blood. A scab signifies the healing of a wound but in this metaphor the healing never arrives, as the wound continues to hemorrhage. The oppression felt by mestizas in the borderlands is a problem that, like the wound, persists and doesn't heal. Through this metaphor, the blood symbolizes the life of the two worlds, and when they grate against each other and merge into one, each one dies a little, losing itself. They suffer from this hybridization as they are transformed into something entirely new. This border culture becomes a place of deconstruction that is a mix of what is left of the 'lifeblood' of the two that merged.

Once she has established the image of the borderland and the emotions that emerge from it through this imagery, she goes on to describe the oppression that is experienced first by anyone who is situated as the "other" in this situation, and then takes it one step further, demonstrating how Mestiza women are uniquely oppressed. The term "mestiza" and "mestizaje" originate from the 1700's as a term used by the Spanish to describe people of different races that were born after conquest. They organized those of mixed race in a very detailed "casta" system which classified

people based on their race and race mixture, which even further resulted in classification socially and economically. Being of mixed race was referred to as half-breed and the term *mestizaje* labeled someone as lesser. This ideology persists as Anzaldua points out that anyone who isn't white or associate themselves with white in these regions are considered illegitimate aliens to the society. Mixed races are specifically seen as impure and are outcasted and stigmatized as, "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead," (3). Anzaldua goes on further, using her own personal experiences to recollect the treatment she received as an outcasted *mestiza* woman. She analyzes these struggles claiming that a woman, "does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey" (20). Anzaldua adds to the dynamic of the oppression of *mestizo/as* just like Gillman argues is necessary for true discussions of identity. She points out how women face judgment and harm from men from both her own culture and white culture. A *mestizo* women must deal with all of the oppressions that mixed races deal with as well as the adversities presented to her as a woman such as being "preyed" upon by men and criticized by two cultures. The term *mestizo/a* was originally used to oppress those of mixed races and while the gender oppressions most likely existed during the period, it isn't until modern times that they are brought up in conversations of oppression, and not until now that Anzaldua publically ties the racial oppression to the gender oppression of *mestiza* identity.

It is equally important to notice how Anzaldua points out that the gendered roles and oppressions are imposed within not only white culture, but her own culture as well. She doesn't portray her culture as an idealized place where these oppressions cease to exist. In her position of critique Anzaldua points out that her culture, "expects women to show greater acceptance of, and

commitment to, the value system of men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If the woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*” (17). Anzaldua points out that her culture demonstrates a value system of men and that women actually be ‘subservient’ to them. In doing so, she asserts her resistance to those gendered stereotypes, willingly choosing to not fully identify with the culture. By stating for herself the reasons for dissociating partially from her own culture, she appears to be reclaiming her identity as a mestiza, demonstrating choice rather than coercion into this identity. She has become empowered to voice her rejection of these values because she is mixed, not fully belonging to it. Anzaldua takes these oppressions of women by her culture and reflects on how they ignite the creation of this “Shadow Beast” which she explains as, “...a rebel in me - the Shadow Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from the outside authorities...It is the part of me that hates restraints of any kind,” (16). This shadow beast is portrayed to be the resistor inside of her to the oppressions she faces, as it refuses orders or restraints. As a form of resistance, the beast has been transformed into a term of empowerment. She analyzes how many mestizos fear rejection, so they conform to societal standards. Because of this, they hide their shadow beast, and the “shadow’ represents fear and timidness. Anzaldua, on the other hand, argues that instead the shadow beast should be awaken and released. Much like Muthyala mentions the re-appropriation of the domestic home for women, Anzaldua shows how compelling it is to take a place, term, or role that was once an institute of oppression and transform it into an idea of empowerment. In this way even the word “shadow” takes on a different meaning. Instead of a word that indicates retreat and timidness, it represents a place where the beast lingers, ready to be released. She challenges the constraints of society through unleashing this beast, and it becomes a symbol of freedom from societal

limitations. In this way, Anzaldua re-appropriates this term “beast” which has been used for ages to negatively describes those who are non-white, specifically, Mexican and indigenous ancestors for Anzaldua. By turning the term into a form of release from the constraints of two patriarchal cultures, she transforms the word into a tool of resistance, combating not only the shackles of society, but the stigmas that come from demeaning names and labels.

Just as she has made the “shadow-beast” her own, Anzaldua has managed to re-appropriate the term *mestiza*, constructing an entirely new consciousness that comes from it. Anzaldua shows that as a *mestiza*, she is free to criticize not just white culture, but her own culture, and in this way she demonstrates resistance of the oppressions placed on women and on mixed races. Anzaldua illustrates the struggle of mixed race through the hybridity of her writing. The joining of language represents the difficulties of *mestizaje* for the reader whereas the mingling of both poem and prose show that while two forms of writing, just like two cultures, work in different ways, they can work great together, excelling where the other falls short. That being said, each does fall short, and Anzaldua makes a point not to idealize any culture. Through her work, Anzaldua creates a voice for the underrepresented perspective of *mestizas* in the borderlands. She debunks the overgeneralization of gender oppression and racial oppression and brings to the public eye the true complexity that identity consists of. Due its complexity, scholars must analyze the intersectionality of oppression. As a *Mestiza*, Anzaldua’s experience is unique, and she brings this truth out. While she admits to the adversities of the borderlands, she manages to combat cultural stigmas through her role as a *mestiza*. The title “The New *Mestiza*” is completely accurate as she engenders a new way of reclaiming *mestiza* identification as a means

of taking control of her identity and actively resisting the limitations of her cultures. In this way a new consciousness of feminism is revealed and the new mestiza is awakened.

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