
U.S. LATINO LITERATURE

A Critical Guide
for Students and Teachers

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In Context: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

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GLORIA ANZALDÚA is a poet, fiction writer, essayist, and lecturer whose work has greatly influenced feminist, lesbian, and Chicano writing style. Born in Jesus Maria of the Valley, in South Texas, in 1942, she later moved with her family to the small town of Hargill, Texas. After her father's death when she was fifteen, Anzaldúa and her family became migrant farmworkers. Despite the obstacles she faced in obtaining a formal education, Anzaldúa managed to complete her undergraduate studies at Pan American University in Texas and receive an M.A. from the University of Texas at Austin. Prior to writing her major work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* in 1987, Anzaldúa had coedited, with Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color* in 1981, which received the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award. She has also edited *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (1990).

Borderlands/La Frontera, a bilingual book combining several genres, is a sort of literary mestizaje (racial mixing); the structure itself represents Anzaldúa's ideas of mixing historiography with poetry in a broad thematic range, from philosophy to poetry. She has stated that the most descriptive term for those of Hispanic descent in the United States is neither Hispanic nor Latino but Mestizo, since all Latinos are of mixed blood. In *Borderlands* she adds a new dimension to the discussion of border consciousness—a theme that includes the ideas of displacement, fragmentation, and estrangement produced by the straddling of borders—with the inclusion of gender, "mestiza consciousness." Perhaps her most important goal is one she has worked

toward from an early age: to overturn Chicano patriarchal family traditions. Feminism, lesbianism, an intense ethnic identity, and a highly personal emphasis (including the use of her own family in her writing) characterize her work. Anzaldúa has been heralded by many critics as the foremost example of the successful mixing of literary genres and a stylistic reflection of the varied cultural influences experienced by Latinos in the United States.

ANALYSIS OF THEMES AND FORMS

In an unpublished interview, Gloria Anzaldúa outlined one of the major differences separating mainstream from marginalized writers: "a minority writer . . . when he or she writes, a lot of times it is with the desire, the imperative, the urge, or the need to explain, interpret and present his or her culture against the silencing, the repression, the erasure by the dominant culture" (Torres, "Gloria Anzaldúa" 11). This imperative leads to a very different type of theory construction in Anzaldúa's view. Under this imperative 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. By contrast, continues Anzaldúa, the theory that proceeds from the academy, which she calls "high theory," is done in abstract language from a very "objective" perspective, excluding autobiographical references. In this mode, a fledgling writer must put his or her experience aside, master a canon of abstract ideas, and write in a fixed genre that goes against Anzaldúa's approach, which is to produce writing that is at once personal and accessible. Hence, for Anzaldúa, in the construction of a theoretical framework that would articulate the experience of the minority writer, anything is allowed; what characterizes this path for women of color is a continual struggle to go against the mainstream and just be oneself. Having taken this road herself, Anzaldúa recognizes the toll she has had to pay because of her commitment to write in a different mode, to speak in the voice of a woman of color.

To date, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* stands as her *obra maestra* (masterpiece). Full of passion, energy, and innovation, *Borderlands* is a far-reaching work, shifting in and out of the traditional literary and expository genres, blending poetry and prose, switching between English and Spanish, all in order to weave an autobiography resonating with the many voices of Anzaldúa's lived, imagined, and "read" experience. The result is an autobiographical work that speaks in poetic, epic, and tragic voices. As referential text it designates the historical, sociolinguistic, and political realities that constitutes the U.S.-Mexican border area from Brownsville, Texas, to San Diego, California.

Borderlands is divided into two major sections: the first is a long essay entitled "Atravesando Fronteras/Crossing Borders," and the second is a collection of poems, "Un Agitado Viento/Ehécatl, the Wind." The essay is subdivided into seven constituent essays, each of which explores the theme of border crossing from distinct perspectives. The opening part, for example, sets the historical and political stage from which Anzaldúa will articulate what it means to live on the border, both literally and figuratively. Entitled "The Homeland, Aztlán/El Otro México," this short essay provides a sweeping view of the major historical events that have gone into producing the present-day border between the United States and Mexico. The first part of the title is derived from available historical scholarship; the second part, "El Otro México," she got from conversations with her family, who see the South Valley of Texas as becoming "un otro México" (another Mexico) because, as an uncle of hers says, "it's full of wetbacks." Thus the slash in the title itself represents a border between scholarly writing and the everyday experience of people who live in the valley. As Anzaldúa says about this text: "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" (Torres, "Gloria Anzaldúa" 13).

It is precisely this merger of scholarship and experience that makes Anzaldúa's "low" mode of theory construction so compelling. For instance, in the last subsection of the opening essay—"El cruzar del mojado/Illegal Crossing"—Anzaldúa, in a sense, replies to her uncle, agreeing that the valley is another Mexico—an *other* of Mexico: "We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing *la migración de los pueblos mexicanos*, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán. This time the traffic is from south to north"¹ (11). This other Mexico is part of Aztlán, with a division (the U.S. border) running through it.

The historical outline she provides starts from the earliest migrations from north to south of the Gochise people circa 1000 B.C., through the conquest of Mexico in 1521, through the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, and into the present. From personal experience Anzaldúa tells of her family's "ancestral lands" which were taken away. Out of such individual experience, the history of the American Southwest was formed.

In the metaphorical figure of the *mujer indocumentada* (undocumented woman), Anzaldúa exploits the full referential power of that history. She, as the undocumented woman, not only represents the dividing line but also occupies it as a matter of ongoing, personal history: "This is her home/this thin edge of/barbwire" (13). As such, she is the perfect model

for a theory of "the Borderlands," with a capital B, which Anzaldúa intends to symbolize the thin line between different beliefs and cultures.

Anzaldúa's language, linguistic codes, and ethnic identity also play key roles in her theory of the borderlands. "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," a brief expository essay, deals with the negative social attitudes toward Chicano ways of speaking, and the effects of these negative attitudes on the linguistic and ethnic self. The description of Chicano Spanish offered by Anzaldúa is concise and informative; it approaches the descriptive requirements of linguistic theory. The analysis of attitudes toward language that she presents rigorously exposes the many ways in which language can be used as an oppressive tool—in attitudes that prohibit Chicano school kids from speaking Spanish at recess, make the accent of Chicano English an impediment to economic advancement, and look down on Chicano Spanish as "mutilation of Spanish." Anzaldúa digs deeply into the political roots of these attitudes with her radical equation between language and identity: "So if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (59).

The final short essay, "*La conciencia de la mestiza*/Towards a New Consciousness," is perhaps the most speculative and theoretically rich of the seven essays that make up "*Atravesando Fronteras*/Crossing Borders." The essay begins by boldly announcing that, like *la mujer indocumentada*, humanity is about to cross into an alien land: "From this radical, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollenization, an 'alien' consciousness is presently in the making—a new mestiza consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands" (77). The capital B indicates that Anzaldúa is talking about the symbolic borderlands, and, as a consequence, the dialectic that will be responsible for the formation of the mestiza consciousness, according to her, will be spiritual in nature. This does not mean, however, that the dialectic is ahistorical; on the contrary, like all her theories, the dialectic derives its power from the experience of daily life. Nor does the spiritual nature of the dialectic mean that it is moving toward absolute synthesis and unity; on the contrary, the dialectic moves toward *mestizaje* (racial mixture). In the end, the dialectic of the mestiza is spiritual in nature only because it works over, through, and on human consciousness, a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single, stable category. Consciousness cannot be just a subject, nor can it be just an object. For Anzaldúa, it is both—the subject studies, the object *is* studied—and more, a third element: a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspects of each new paradigm" (79–80). The process of breaking down unities amounts to the daily work of resisting Anglo-American political hegemonies, while, at the same time, allowing

for political alliances; resisting the oppressive elements of Chicano culture, while understanding their roots in oppression. Above all, mestiza consciousness designates what Anzaldúa calls "a tolerance for ambiguity," a concept that is clearly linked to her experience with language. Like the phenomenon of linguistic ambiguity, which requires that one strive to see through the surface structure of an utterance to understand how other potential meanings also reside in the deep structure, Anzaldúa points to the many meanings with which one can invest reality. In this task it is once again the mestiza who is already in advance of others.

Borderlands exemplifies the political potential of postmodern aesthetics; the rich blend of narrative genres and styles extends the range of *Borderlands* into such topics and themes as history, philosophy, linguistics, and psychology. Thus, *Borderlands* is as much a multicultural epic as an autobiography. It is also however an engaged piece of literature, which is to say that it confronts U.S. society and critiques its oppressive institutional structures and policies. Gloria Anzaldúa describes herself as a woman writer who has gone against the grain of the Anglo-American tradition of literature. As a Chicana and a lesbian writer, Anzaldúa embodies several fronts marginalized by Anglo-American literary tradition. By writing *Borderlands* in a code-switching style, by drawing from a variety of generic social codes, and by disrupting the norms of cohesion and coherence in the textual composition of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa challenges the cultural authorities of the United States and the literary canon of the Anglo-American academy. Against a tradition that has its roots in a Puritan history and its centers of authority in the American university, Anzaldúa indeed seems to be clearing a much needed space for herself and other minority writers who seek literary self-representation. Despite these challenges, *Borderlands* is widely taught in a variety of humanities courses on U.S. campuses in such areas as Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Chicano/a and American Literature. The fact that an essay such as this one is now needed to facilitate the teaching of the work is evidence that Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* is making a difference in the way U.S. society and culture perceives itself; indeed, *Borderlands* can be read profitably with this general concern in mind.

Any critical evaluation of *Borderlands* would be remiss if it did not situate the work within the current postmodern condition. In *Retrospace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature*, one of the most highly influential critical essays written on Chicano/a literary discourse, Juan Bruce-Novoa asserts that Chicano/a literature is a response to the chaos of modern life. Certainly, in its structural composition, *Borderlands* represents the chaos of contemporary modern society. But, because *Borderlands* is an engaged text of literature, the way it represents chaos involves a questioning of the social underpinnings of that chaos. When Gloria Anzaldúa

picks up the pen in the social act of writing, the scope of her creativity is broader than the life of a single self, and the chaos of modern society is not merely a philosophical abstraction but the concrete effect of social and economic forces. The manner in which Anzaldúa engages life with literature in *Borderlands* gives the text its unique authority to speak with such forthrightness, and while Anzaldúa speaks with a strong didactic voice in *Borderlands*, she does not do so at the expense of literary aesthetics. Art and politics merge for Anzaldúa in her notion of "mestiza consciousness." To her, mestiza consciousness, to some extent, composes the text and its relationship to Anglo-American literary history can provide ways to understand and teach the work.

Mestiza consciousness represents a challenge and a contribution to Western metaphysics in that it posits that life is not one thing and logic another, with different rules governing the two. Instead, as a basic *modus operandi*, Anzaldúa rejects that assumption in favor of the view that both life and logic are always changing through their interaction with each other; a person's identity is not static, nor is the logic of the surrounding world. Anzaldúa takes to heart the Heraclitean proposition that one can never step twice into the same river, and she gives it her own borderlands bent. Many students of *Borderlands* quickly become attuned to this shifting notion of identity, and they often quote the following passage: "That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs" (79). In philosophical terms, Anzaldúa describes the reason why mestiza consciousness cannot begin with a comfortable definition of identity: the mestiza, bombarded from every sector of U.S. society, often cannot decide who or what she is in a way that satisfies institutional ideologies.

Mestiza consciousness, then, is necessary if the mestiza is to keep U.S. society from having the last word on her identity. Anzaldúa locates this effort in the body, describing it as "a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (80). This aspect of mestiza consciousness does not totally negate the idea of identity *per se* but seeks instead to keep identity an open question, a possibility. In other words, for the mestiza of which Anzaldúa speaks, identity is not a given but a matter of daily crafting from the experience of everyday life.

From the intense focus on the experience of everyday life, Anzaldúa draws the authority to contest the assumption that the categories of Western logic are in any way unaffected by such experience. Anzaldúa wants her writing to matter to the culture and society of the United States in a concrete political and aesthetic way. Her idea of mestiza consciousness exposes the complicity of Western idea of logic and political oppression. Anzaldúa is very explicit about demonstrating the oppressive effects of the

subject-object dichotomy on the body of the mestiza. The author allows her mestiza consciousness to take speculative flight in the desire to change the world: "The answer to the problems between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts" (80). From this point of view, the subject-object dichotomy is not simply an innocent abstraction away from everyday life experience, but a rigid imposition on the mind and body of the mestiza. Anzaldúa's literary discourse at such points in her text appears as an incisive piece of critical philosophy, a dialectic that mixes life experience with abstract logic creating a *mestizaje*, a mixture, blending, hybridity of critical categories with a theoretical vision of her everyday life. Thus, the social act of writing *Borderlands* is a political act of resistance against the tendency in Western culture and its educational curriculum to reduce the complexity of human life to simple dichotomies.

As a postmodern text, *Borderlands* is not linear and hence can be opened and read beginning with any chapter, a trait that resembles the epic characteristic of beginning a story line in *medias res*. This is a great advantage when teaching *Borderlands* not only because it justifies referring to the text as a multicultural epic but also because this characteristic is intimately related to the logic of postmodernism which relies on a notion of identity that is supple, flexible, and pliant, and thus goes against the grain of the Western prescription that identity must be defined by a set of necessary and sufficient traits. Anzaldúa's view of identity does not imply unilaterally that the postmodern condition is an "anything goes" situation. As a *mestizaje* of art and politics, *Borderlands* appeals to a particular social, linguistic, and ethnic identity aware that these categories are in constant flux. Postmodern logic thus conceived is a logic of inclusion, of "both" rather than "either-or." *Borderlands'* mestiza consciousness mirrors and practices this logic of inclusion.

The concept of mestiza consciousness gives the seven narrative autobiographical chapters of *Borderlands* an underlying unity. (Undoubtedly a study of Anzaldúa's poetry in *Borderlands* can be carried out through the lens of mestiza consciousness, but such a focus merits its own space). Chapter one, "The Homeland, Aztlán/*El otro México*," immediately introduces readers to the dynamic of double logic in *Borderlands*: the American Southwest is at once the home of Chicanas and Chicanos and a foreign place. This situation creates for the Mexican-descended population of this geographical region a double consciousness. On the one hand, everything about the borderlands looks quite familiar to the Chicano/a population because, prior to 1848, this geographical zone was under the sovereign rule of Mexico. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is thus a key document for understanding not only *Borderlands* but also the entire literary production of Chicano/a writers. Anzaldúa's impas-

sioned and ironic version of that history merits close inspection not only for what she says about it but also for what she leaves unstated. Anzaldúa does not lead the reader toward her conclusions in linear form step by step. Rather, she prefers that her historical account be effective not only because of the sheer weight of the history of the U.S. Southwest, but also by the manner in which she dramatizes it in both lyric and prose.

In chapter two, Anzaldúa turns her mestiza dialectics in the direction of Chicano culture and levels a devastating critique of its own oppressive ways toward Chicanas. Herein the reader becomes aware of Anzaldúa's total resistance to the oppression of her female body from any and all quarters. What is especially intriguing about this chapter is the image of the Shadow Beast, a source of strength for Anzaldúa to resist Chicano culture's insistence that she behave like a traditional Mexican woman. The Shadow Beast image is also a disruptive sexual force, much like Sigmund Freud's concept of the libido as sexual energy. Regarding mestiza consciousness, the Shadow Beast additionally offers the promise of a spiritual unification of Anzaldúa's male and female selves in what she calls the *hieros gamos*, a Greek expression meaning "divine marriage." A rich storehouse of multileveled meanings is opened up, particularly for those readers who are acquainted with Carl Jung's version of psychoanalysis. Anzaldúa's open declaration of her lesbianism is an example of resistance to what could be called "compulsory heterosexuality." Her declaration that she chose her lesbian sexuality thus places *Borderlands* squarely within the maelstrom of the multicultural debates marking the politics of representation in contemporary American society.

Anzaldúa links chapters three and four closely with the image of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, an image she uses to represent the unconscious processes of the mind—dreams, uncanny sensations, defense mechanisms, compulsions, and so on. No simple literary device, the image of Coatlicue in Anzaldúa's hands is first and foremost a way to heal the effects of oppressive Western institutions and their ideologies—the Catholic and Protestant religions, Western anthropology and psychology; in sum, the subject-object dichotomy. The detailed account of the image of Coatlicue and the syncretism that ensues when the Virgin of Guadalupe appears to Juan Diego in 1531 establish an analogy with the opening anecdote from the author's own life and her poem. Just as the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe on Tepeyac Hill in the Mexican colonial capital—the site of Coatlicue's temple—proved to be a form of indigenous resistance to the authority of Spanish Catholicism, so Anzaldúa now exercises the right to theorize the wounds on her body and use that theory—the Coatlicue state—to contest the oppression of institutionalized religion and institutional Western education.

Chapters five and six, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" and "Tilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink," introduce the role of language and the social act of writing. Chapter five, for instance, affirms the importance for the new mestiza of writing in her home dialect. The affirmation of one's dialect reflects a practical reality; if the new mestiza/o delays creativity until attaining accomplishment in the Western literary and critical canon, she/he might by default give up on it altogether. Of course, *Borderlands* is itself a major example of a piece of writing that affirms the home dialect, and with effective results. It is also proof that a "homely" dialect can be used to express the "high" theoretical concepts of the Western academy.

A key example of this is seen in the Mexican-Spanish proverb Anzaldúa poses as an epigraph to her description of the linguistic codes of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands: "*Quien tiene boca se equivoca*" (Whoever speaks may err in doing so [my translation], 55). This piece of Mexican folk wisdom encapsulates the necessity to maintain a continual critique of one's own point of view by sheer dint of the fact that the act of speaking contains perils. Thus, mestiza consciousness requires that, on the one hand, the position one takes on a subject should carry a substantial degree of authority while, on the other, it should question the full impact of that position. A good example of the process of cross-referencing is elucidated in Anzaldúa's categorical proposition: "Language is a male discourse" (54). By itself this declarative statement imputes a negative essence to language in the sense that language is a hostile site for the new mestiza. While Anzaldúa contests the erasure of female identity in language, nothing about her mestiza consciousness sanctions an argument against men.

In fact, in chapter seven, Anzaldúa shows that the scope of her dialectics of *mestizaje* must include the male presence. Her discourse entitled, "*Que no se nos olvide los hombres*" (Let us not forget the men [my translation], 83), is in effect a compassionate one, for it historicizes the way men, Chicano and non-Chicano alike, internalize a false machismo. Nothing could be more profitable for male students that to expose the negative effects that patriarchy has on their own ideological consciousness. The generosity of this point of view should provide ample material for critical discussion and debate.

TEACHING THE WORK

1. Any one of the dramatic scenes that make up chapter one can be studied for the levels of meaning Anzaldúa seeks to connote regarding history and borders. The scene concerning Pedro, a relative who is deported by the immigration authorities, for example, is especially gripping

as it is tinged with a touch of humor. How does this episode document the shame and injustice Pedro experiences? Have students analyze the significance of borders in people's lives.

2. The spiritual element Anzaldúa adds to her mestiza dialectics can be discussed at length with respect to her daring self-analysis in which she proposes that she chose to be a lesbian. This topic provides an opportunity for students to discuss issues around sexuality, personal identity, and social pressures to conform.

3. Discuss the image of the Aztec female deity and its rich meaning, keeping in mind when teaching chapters three and four that Anzaldúa does not employ it in her text as a purely formal literary device.

4. Teachers can direct students to consider the juxtaposition of personal experience with history. Discuss the appearance of snakes in chapter three and what they signify. Anzaldúa's poem *ella tiene su tono* dramatizes the way early childhood experiences can have a determinative character throughout one's life, as the experience of being bitten by a snake had on her. This could lead to a fascinating discussion of personal events in the students' lives of a similarly important nature.

5. The teacher of *Borderlands* can use chapters five and six to address the issue of authority and language. Within *Borderlands* the teacher can move throughout the text paying attention to just how Anzaldúa observes the profound knowledge of folk language and wisdom in the composition of her own text.

NOTE

1. All page numbers in parentheses refer to the 1987 edition of *Borderlands: The New Mestiza/La frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books).

RELATED WORKS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa. San Francisco: Spinners/Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990. Strengthens Anzaldúa's position as a committed writer, here working to give space to a cross-spectrum of women writers.

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Bruce-Novoa, Juan. *Retrospace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1990. Contains update of his classic essay, "The Space of Chicano Literature."

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