# COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION AREA 3

## RACE, CULTURE AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

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Question 2. a)

**For many writers and artists of colour, theoretical approaches to the effects of imperialism, colonialism, and oppression have to be connected to the textuality of the art or literary work. Discuss in this context, the importance of what has been called "border writing" as a means of resistance and transformation.**

Writer Gloria Anzuldúa writes in her preface to her influential book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*:

> The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same terriotry, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.[1]

Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña elaborates the potentially shifting meanings of borders in his dialogue with collaborator, Coco Fusco, "Bilingualism, Biculturalism and Borders."

> What does the border mean? The border for us is an elastic metaphor that we can reposition in order to talk about many issues. For example, for the Mexican, the U.S.-Mexican border is an absolutely necessary border to defend itself from the United States. The border is a wall. The border is an abyss. The Mexican who crosses traditionally falls into this abyss and becomes a traitor. For the Chicano, the border has multiple mythical connotations. The border is the umbilical cord with Mexico: the place to return, to regenerate.
>
> For the North American, the border becomes a mythical notion of national security. The border is where the Third World begins. The U.S. Media conceives of the border as a kind of war zone — a place of conflict, of threat, of invasion.[2]

The border, as Annamarie Jagose points out in her critique of Anzuldúa's book, has a slash and suture quality, that is, it performs a double function in bisecting two parts whose relation may be variously considered. More accurately, perhaps, she describes a tripartite structure which delimits two parts and their convergent area. Represented as a "trichotomous structure," as

Jagose suggests, it "provides a model capable of inscribing the border's dynamics, the way in which its interposition between categories enables the at times simultaneous opposition, codependance, and even coincidence of those categories."[3] The border, in other words, exists precisely because of a convergence of two areas needing distinction from each other. Geographically, it determines the land masses of distinct territories, the division between nation-states.

The idea of the border as a conceptual site for cultural reflection and resistance is described by Gómez-Peña as emerging at the height of Chicano nationalism in 1969, amongst an interdisiciplinary group of artists and poets called Toltecas in Aztlán (the U.S. Southwest), who made use of "the border as a laboratory."[4] Gómez-Peña himself participated to develop the later Border Art Workshop in the early 1980s at the sites of the San Diego-Tijuana borders.

"Border writing" itself may be most directly associated with the textual poetics of Anzuldúa, who in 1988 published *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. While the border enacts a precise site of national division, "a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge," Anzuldúa's borderland "is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition."[5] More generally, Alfred Arteaga writes that "Chicano verse actualizes the discourse of the border and embraces a broad range of difference...The border as discursive and existential fact does something to the interpretation of Chicano writing."[6]

What perhaps most particularly characterizes "border writing" is its linguistic interplays, intercultural heteroglossias (Arteaga), cultural multiplicities (Grewal). In emerging from the geo-political conditions of the Texas-Mexico border, and more specifically from within the defiant histories

of Chicano/Chicana cultures within the U.S., these cultural practices are characterized by hybridized formal expressions that draw on the cultural intersections between Mexican and Anglo-American clashes, articulations of a geographical region whose complex history is made up of conquest, colonialism, displacement and expropriations of land.

Yet as both Anzuldúa and Gómez-Peña suggest, the concept of the borderland might also operate metaphorically to encompass a space of convergence between cultures, to expansively explore a variety of conditions and histories.

Deploying the historical and imaginary borders between Mexico and the United States as her point of departure, Anzuldúa elaborates a complex notion of a subject-in-process — the *mestiza* — located within a shifting space of what she terms the borderlands. The imbrication of the social subject into a spatialized geopolitical economy foregrounds how the self is a *site* of meaning production, constructed within contingent, changing moments and contexts. Norma Alarcón writes, "Through the speaking critical subject-in-process cultural production reintroduces what was there before in new and dynamic combinatory transculturations."[7] Significantly, Anzuldúa's elaboration occurs through a tri-lingual, critical textual poetics configured through re-sifted and entwined historical and subjective nexuses. Culture is thus conceived "as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes criscross from within and beyond its borders."[8]

Alarcón suggests that what is at stake in Anzuldúa's writings is the very unified subject of Western (patriarchal) knowledge. For Alarcón, Anzuldúa creates new subject positionings, neither unitary, nor binary, but multiply produced as a "mestiza consciousness," metaphorically extending the biology of mixed bloods. While briefly suspending an elaboration of this heterogeneously produced subject, what is significant here is a consideration

of how textually experimental articulations are inextricably bound in giving rise to this de-centred subject. As I have described in more detail in my response to AREA 2/QUESTION 5, Martiniquan writer Aimé Césaire had identified the double sites of theory and poetics as instrumental in the emancipatory movements of "négritude" in the 1940s. Indeed historically, cultural practices as carriers of ideological meaning and of subversion have effected experimental, avant garde traditions throughout this century in a variety of media from performance and photography to poetics.

An attentive consideration of Anzuldúa's opening essay, "The Homeland, Aztlán/*El otro México*" will illustrate how her textual approach in (re)writing a history of the (now) U.S. southwest and Mexico produces a subtext of meanings which itself reflect on the cultural hybridity of that region, and more broadly, on the disciplinary implications of how histories are written.

What is immediately apparent is how with remarkable fluidity the text shifts amongst the three languages of English, Castillian Spanish, and Chicano Spanish. It also makes use of multiple voices (including her mother's and grandmother's), and melds various genres, amongst them, poetry and autobiography, as well as enacting disciplinary crossings through anthropology, history, and even a film. Through a weaving of these multiple textual approaches, Anzuldúa creates a historically compressed, alternately empirical and poetic accounting of Mexico and Aztlán with resonances into the immediate present. Anzuldúa has nowhere but the U.S. to call her home, she reminds us, and she potently rewrites a history of Anglo-American colonialism which displaced, expropriated lands from and then actively discriminated against thousands of *téjanas*, who in most cases, had nowhere else to go.

"For Anzuldúa," writes Inderpal Grewal, "the politics of language becomes the politics of inhabiting different locations without suggesting which is her 'true' language."[9] (Though I would suggest that Anzuldúa's texts would do away with any notion of "true language" altogether.) That Anzuldúa writes trilingually and without translation asserts the tensions between linguistic cultures in Aztlán, where languages and meanings are neither neutral nor interchangeable, but instead continually compete for power and authority. Arteaga writes: "In the broad interface between Anglo and Latin America, the operative tropes, the definitions, the histories and logics and legal codes, the semantics and the epistemes are contested daily."[10] The assertion of multiple languages in her text, is therefore, an assertion of contestatory subjectivities and agency over one's overlapping cultural identities. The presence of various Spanish dialects — Castillian, Chicano, Tex-Mex, and some 4 other languages that Anzuldúa makes reference to — also indicates linguistic categories that point toward the presence of other borders and histories. In this sense, English textually operates (like the Castillian Spanish), not as a dominant and dominating language, but the language of the colonizer, and in this merely another dialect culturally and historically produced and used under particular conditions.

In addition to the linguistic hybridity of the the text, disciplinary boundaries are effortlessly but effectively crossed, challenging the singular and reductive ways in which knowledge is produced through the empirical cataloguing of information and the production of disciplinary subjects. Anzuldúa incorporates the discourses of history and anthropology that have produced knowledge of the region and peoples of Aztlán, (even employing a specialized vocabulary about chromosomes derived from biology, genetics and eugenics to develop her figure of the *mestiza*). In concert with a wild conflation of

genres in a single text — poetics, autobiography, women's story-telling and mythology — Anzuldúa actively produces a space to "speak back" to the authority of historical imperialist narratives.

What emerges is a textual hybrid poetics composed of voices that disrupt the allegedly empirical narratives of observation descended from history and anthropology. Perhaps even more effectively than disruption, in performatively demonstrating the multiple ways in which knowledge and meaning are produced by a text, it delimits the failure of the anthropologist's gaze, the inadequate gaps of the historian's language — the limitations of totalizing discursive aspirations.

In utilizing multiple discourses to demonstrate a proces of meaning production, the effects are exponential. Aztlán's *history* is searingly re-written: from the 16th century invasion of Mexico by Cortés, to the daily surveillance by Border patrol "hunters in army-green uniforms" stalking and tracking Mexican refugees with "powerful nightvision of electronic sensing devices "[11] hidden behind a McDonalds at a Texas bordertown. The spatial vocabulary used to describe the actual U.S-Mexican borders of contestation multiply to produce Anzuldúa's conceptual notion of the "borderlands," foregrounding the violence of geography in arbitrarily producing the delimitations of a nation-state and an ensueing (dis)organization and dispersal of social subjects. And finally, in this reorientation of knowledge production through poetic excesses and the foregrounding and filling of gaps, the figure of the *mestiza* emerges as a symbolic possibility for disruption and re-imagining.

Grewal writes that Anzuldúa's "borderland cannot be analyzed through theories of Asian diasporas such as those suggested by Homi Bhabha," citing the specificities of British colonial imperialism, and those of

U.S.-Mexican relations configured under Spanish imperial practices.[12] However it seems that Bhabha's extensive commentary on hybridization and the cultural production of a "third space" are more than resonant. Jagose, in taking issue with the utopic aspirations of Anzuldúa's formulations, in fact, suggests, following Bhabha's formulation, that Anzuldúa's border trope of the *mestiza* inadvertently and unwittingly *represents* the very condition of the colonial relationship, rather than signalling its demise.[13] She writes that the "foregrounding of the figures of the border and the *mestiza*, as demonstrating the possibility of a radically new, utopic hybridization....are also misreadings. They remain oblivious to the duplicity of those figures...to their internal resistance to utopic recuperation."[14]

Bhabha has written how difference and otherness are not outside, nor entirely oppositional to the authority of the dominant, but is rather, "a pressure, and a presence, that acts constantly, if unevenly, along the entire boundary of authorization...."[15] He elaborates the ambivalent presence of authority, that is the manner in which that very enunciation of authority speaks it s own ambiguity in disclosing its rules of recognition ("those social texts of epistemic, ethnocentric, nationalist intelligibility,"[16]) which inadvertently and simultaneously, "articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power."[17] Allegedly following Bhabha, Jagose suggests that the *mestiza* cannot effect a "triumphant excess of the border's legislation,"[18] but rather is the very site of its authority in crisis, she signals those very identifications of recognition and difference under the colonial relation. Like the trope of the border itself, she suggests, the tripartite structure of which it figures as its line of demarcation, continually evokes the tension of differences. Yet Jagose's critique functions only because it elides the transformative effects that Bhabha's notion of

hybridity itself represents, in which the recognizable structures of differentiation in fact become dissolved. Inthis regard, Bhabha writes:

> For the unitary voice of command is interrupted by questions that arise from the heterogeneous sites and circuits of power which, though momentarily fixed in the authoritiative alignment of subjects, must continually be re-presented in the production of terror or fear — the paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it *breaks down the symmetry of self/other, inside/outside.*[18] (My emphasis)

**Footnotes**

1 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera, The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), no page #.
2 Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "Bilingualism, Biculturalism and Borders," in Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the America.* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 148.
3 Annamarie Jagose, "Slash and Suture: Post/Colonialism in Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza," in *Feminism and the Politics of Difference,* Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman, eds. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 213.
4 Fusco and Gómez-Peña, 147.
5 Anzuldúa, 3.
6 Alfred Arteaga , "An Other Tongue," in *An Other Tongue,* ed. Alfred Arteaga (London: Duke UP, 1994), 10-11.
7 Norma Alarcón, "Conjugating Subjects: The Heteroglossia of Essence and Resistance," in *An Other Tongue,* ed. Alfred Arteaga (London: Duke UP, 1994) 137.
8 Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon, 1989),20.
9 Inderpal Grewal, "Autobiographic Subjects, Diasporic Locations: Meatless Days and Borderlands," in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices,* eds. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994), 249.
10 Arteaga, 11-12.
11 Anzuldúa, 11-12.
12 Alarcón, 138.
13 Grewal,
14 Jagose, 224.
15 Ibid, 212.
16 Bhabha, Homi. "Signs taken for wonders: Questions of Ambivelence and Authority under a tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," in *"Race,," Writing and Difference,* ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), 171.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 172.
19 Ibid., 177.