

Teaching Chicana Literature from a Gender and Queer Perspective.

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(A small tribute to Gloria Anzaldúa who led the way ahead)

Abstract Resumen

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A political commitment to women must involve, by definition, a political commitment to lesbians as well. To refuse to allow the Chicana lesbian the right to the free expression of her own sexuality, and her politicization of it, is in the deepest sense to deny one's own self the right to the same. I guarantee you; there will be no change in heterosexual relations as long as the Chicano community keeps us lesbians and gay men political prisoners among our own people. Any movement built on the fear and loathing of anyone is a failed movement

(Moraga, 139-140).

Addressing the questions of gender and sexuality in Chicana literature is always a conflictive task, which implies a big challenge to the current vision of women from Latin American descent as sexualized bodies, as objects of desire, whose main function on Earth consists of pleasing their fellow males. The fact that heterosexuality means women's subordination in Latino culture and tradition, as it has been historically imposed by the Catholic Church, makes not only Chicanas but Latinas at large contemplate lesbianism as a liberation and, thus, it is not casual that most of the big names in Chicana theory have shown their gay character. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherry Moraga pioneered

and championed the struggle for the recognition of Chicana lesbians both in the Chicano cultural world and the Anglo academic sphere.

Against the objectification imposed by colonialism that has been nowadays ratified by neocolonialism, the identity marker represented by the term “Chicana” emerges as a new claim, controversial and implying radical politics very much involved with visibility and acceptance of diversity within the sphere of the US. Different from other Latinas who, among other identity questions, do not partake in the status of indigenous inhabitants of the US, the claim of the Chicana or Xicana, as Ana Castillo represents the concept in *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, becomes even more powerful when referred to politics of gender. She engages in a discussion about appropriate terminology to include women of Mexican descent, about the impossibility of conciliating political, racial and ethnic definitions with indigenous blood in a single term. Thus, Castillo expresses her frustration about not finding an accurate term to describe all these women who are also concerned with the social and political ramifications of living in a hierarchical society: “When discussing activism I often use Chicano/a. I introduce here the word Xicanisma, a term that I will use to refer to the concept of Chicana feminism” (Castillo, 10). Deborah Miranda makes a similar claim when she states that: “Women of color still need to talk about what’s like to be an indigenous person alive in her contemporary, colonized homeland; someone who sees few traces of an indigenous presence-and yet knows that indigenous presence is there because she is it” (Miranda, 194).

Thus, inhabiting the physical and mental borderlands implies according to Carla Trujillo that: “the Chicana lesbian is similar to any other Chicana, or any other lesbian,

yet her own experience is usually that of attempting to fit into two worlds, neither of which is readily accepting.” These two worlds, the Anglo and the traditional Mexican, collide for Chicana lesbians because both fail to understand and partake in their celebration of love between women. Chicanos reject these women, treat them as sinners and claim they have been contaminated by the Anglo world, which, unfortunately, does not recognize these women as first class citizens because of their race. The intersection of race and gender, therefore, proves disastrous for Chicana lesbians who are bound to fight for a space of their own which they have been denied throughout history. Lesbians see homophobia where heterosexuals may be thinking of racism. Butler supports the view of the intersection of several variables as a force that contributes to diminish the status of inferiority of the lesbian of color: “It seems crucial to resist the model of power that would set up racism and homophobia and misogyny as parallel or analogical relations.” (Butler: 1993, 18). Intersectionality, however, works best as a critical approach to consider when dealing with these claims and identity politics, that is to say, discussions of race, ethnicity, class and gender acquire the highest priority in this type of research where queer identities come to the forefront:

The issue of being a lesbian is still uncomfortable for many heterosexual Chicanas and Chicanos, even (and especially) those in academic circles. Our culture seeks to diminish us by placing us in a context of an Anglo construction, a supposed *vendida* to the race. More realistically it is probably due to the fact that we do not align ourselves with the controlling forces of compulsory heterosexuality. Further, as Chicanas, we grow up defined and subsequently confined, in a male context: daddy’s girl, some

guy's sister, girlfriend, wife, or mother. By being lesbians, we refuse to need a man to form our own identities as women. This constitutes a "rebellion" many Chicanas/os cannot handle (Trujillo intro).

The colonization and objectification of the female body in a patriarchal society such as the American one becomes in Chicano culture a sanctioned capitalist practice where the owner (man), frequently the head of the family, enslaves his property (woman) represented by mothers, sisters, wives, daughters and even granddaughters in some cases. The enslavement and abuse of the female body, unable to express itself in a patriarchal and capitalist environment has encouraged the use of the practice of writing as a therapeutical effect. The narrative body becomes a virtual map where all types of experiences are inscribed, finding a place free of censorship. By creating a cartography of autobiographies and testimonial writings, Chicana lesbians entered the literary and editorial world not with much success in the beginning but the resistance that they found in those years has been transformed into a loud clapping which has established them by their own right inside the "womanist" trend as activist women of color.

Teaching the difficulties encountered when reading these lesbian autobiographies leads necessarily to a discussion about the images of abused bodies in myths and traditions, where for example, the raped body of La Malinche is inscribed. This powerful icon rescued by Chicana writers as the example of the imposition of patriarchy upon the indigenous peoples becomes a model for modern Chicana writers as the mother of the race. The so long idealized abstract figure of the mother becomes in the concrete case of La Malinche the epitome of sin and evil in the hands of the Catholic Church.

Although not directly related to homosexuality, La Malinche reminds Chicanas of the suffering brought to their people by colonization and the indeletable imprints left for future generations of mestizas since as Mary Matsuda states, “subordination leaves marks on the body” (64). Chicana lesbians carry their marks along with pride, exploring their homosexual desire in ways that defy their tradition and culture. Rescuing the forgotten oral tradition has provided in most cases the power necessary to accomplish the task of regaining a lost voice. Anzaldúa complains in *Making Faces* how the Chicana lesbian has been forced to wear a mask to hide her true face rejected by Anglo Americans. This anthology bases its principle on the affirmation that “you are the shaper of your flesh as well as if your own soul,” which is absolutely supported by the Aztec tradition Anzaldúa herself shares with the reader in the introduction: “According to the ancient nahuas, one was put on earth to create one’s own ‘face’ (body) and ‘heart’(soul). To them the soul was the speaker of words and the body a doer of deeds” (Anzaldúa: 1990, xvi)

Hence, beside the image of Malitzin Tenepal, the figure of La Llorona has also been deeply transformed and recalled as a woman and a mother who suffered the oppression and rejection of men. In “Woman Hollering Creek” Cisneros rewrites the tale of La Llorona, a tale of male dominance and female submission and treachery, into a story of strong women who, in solidarity with one another, transform the powerless lament into a battle cry of resistance against male dominance: “As New Mestiza theorist in action, Cisneros confronts a major misogynist cultural legend, La Llorona, the Weeping Woman, and transforms her into a source of female power. In this frontera tale, a Mexican woman grows up on popular culture, the written and televised novelas and popular legends like that of la Llorona and confronts what it takes to remove herself from

the power they hold over her” (Saldivar-Hull, 106). The transcendence of this account for Chicana lesbian critical theory resides in the fact that the empowered woman liberated from the patriarchal constraints “could be figured as a Chicana lesbian,” offering new alternatives for women’s sexuality “in a culture that devalues women who stray from male defined roles.” (Saldivar-Hull, 107). But Chicana lesbian writers have also adapted the image of La Llorona to fulfill their own purpose in their narratives. Thus, Monica Palacios presents, in a very humorous fashion, a fatal lesbian romance in “La Llorona Loca: The Other side,” included in Trujillo’s *Chicana lesbians*. Caliente, the protagonist of the story, unable to control her jealousy, drowns her unfaithful lover in the river and subsequently dies herself. After both women were buried, the ghost of Caliente was seen weeping and looking for her lover. La Llorona Loca cries for the loss of her woman instead of her children. She is still a jealous woman betrayed by her partner and looking for revenge in the act of murder, but the connotation of the bad mother is finally and successfully dropped in Palacios’ story allowing humour to participate in the drama of lesbian relationships.

How these writers approach the question of the taboo of body functions (menstruation above all) and give visibility to the taboo of parental abuse gets analyzed in depth by the testimonies given in *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians*, *Chicana Lesbians* and in *The sexuality of Latinas*. Most of the contributors of these anthologies deal in an open manner with the, until then, unspeakable matter of female homosexuality: “Though our fathers had much to do with imposing a sexual conformity, it was usually our mothers who actually whispered the ‘taboo nature’ of same-sex relationships. How often were we told in this manner that anything but the love of a man was wrong – an affront to nature.

Our very existence upsets the gender-specific role-playing our mothers so aggressively employ.” (Carla Trujillo X)

These three anthologies constitute a starting point for Chicana queer studies and become unavoidable when teaching Chicana feminist issues. They deal with the question of portraying the female body from the point of view of the subject, of the sexual agent responsible and responding to forms of pleasure, different from the heterosexual norm imposed by religion, one of main forces of the neocolonial imposition. Judith Butler complains in *Gender Trouble* about the consideration of lesbianism as a desexualization of the female body. This is precisely what these anthologies fight against through the testimonies of the contributors. The images of sexual desire that appear in these writings constitute a true rebellion against the silence about women’s sexuality that had reigned in Chicano and Mexican literature up until the 80s. The explosion of literary testimonies appeared as a reaction to the historical repression lived by women and as a new attempt to cross borders, in this case, the sexual borderlands as Anzaldúa herself expresses in her preface to *Borderlands*: “The Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa Preface: 1987).

The origin of any Third World queer critical theory has to be sought in the Civil Rights Movement that started in America in the 1950s more than in Western feminist theories. It is by using the frame of this true revolution led by African Americans which changed the world for the better that students can appreciate the effort of people of color

and especially women towards visibility. It is through the attainment of recognition as human beings that homosexuals of color appear close to the civil rights forefront.

To be concerned about the sexuality of women of color was an insult to women in the Third World literally starving to death. But the only hunger I have ever known was the hunger for sex and the hunger for freedom and somehow, in my mind, and heart, they were related and certainly not mutually exclusive. If I could not use the source of my hunger as the source of my activism, how then was I to be politically effective? But finally here was a movement, first voiced by U.S. Black women, which promised to deal with the oppression that occurred under the skin as well, and by virtue of the fact that that skin was female and colored. For the damage that has been done to use sexually has penetrated our minds as well as our bodies. The existence of rape, the veil, genital mutilation, violence against lesbians, have bludgeoned our entire perception of ourselves as female beings (Moraga 133)

Adding the question of gender to a literary work implies activism and feminist struggle. Coalition is the way for this inclusion in feminism. In the feminist battle of women of color, class cannot longer be separated from gender issues. Marxist feminism has to adapt to the new requirements of grassroots movements fighting for reproductive rights: sterilization, rapes, etc. Intersectionality appears once again as the most likely successful approach for this kind of narratives since these women continue their battle against those who oppose their race, class, gender or sexual orientation (Saldivar-Hull, 34). Spivak and her studies on the subaltern which give power to the oppressed and

silenced seem appropriate when teaching literature about women of color while the question about feminism being constantly labeled as a white middle class women's movement always raises doubt as to accurateness.

Focusing on the literary works of Chicana lesbians and analyzing them closely it is revealed that writing functions somehow as a therapy that allows them to express their true identity outside the masks Anzaldúa alluded to. Although many characters in her novels engage openly in homosexual practices, it is in *Chicana Lesbians* that Ana Castillo comes out of the closet with statements clearly supporting lesbianism and criticizing white feminists. She admits feeling closer to African American women than to their fellow Chicano and Latino male activists. She admits in "La Macha: Toward a Beautiful Whole Self" that her experience as a woman differs completely from the political aims of *El Movimiento Chicano/Latino* which she abandoned "with a great sense of despair as a woman" when she felt that as a Latina and with her Catholic upbringing the men in *El Movimiento Latino* "would do as men had been doing to women throughout the ages whenever we embarked on the subject of our sexual desire, and not take my endeavor as serious intellectual discourse. They would not separate my work from the body that I am, the woman who I am, nor see me as speaking from the universal experience of woman, just as they might write of their own desire as 'man.'" (Trujillo 24)

What Castillo fights in those lines and in all her works is the Catholic tradition that portrays women divided by the dichotomy of the Virgin/prostitute (whore). This constrictive model of femininity offered to Mexican American women by their tradition has luckily moved one step forward, as Chicana women writers have been providing more alternatives to the spectrum and more possibilities in between those two radical

categories for women. The limited space provided by the Virgin status, which for Chicanas is represented by the Virgin of Guadalupe, limits their experience as women to be wives and mothers and eventually go to heaven as Helen Gurney Brown predicted: “good girls go to heaven, bad ones go everywhere.” The whore part, however, provides unlimited possibilities once a Chicana comes to terms with being rejected from the dominant discourse and dominant culture, and ends up transcending the space. Sonia Saldivar finds that transgression in Sandra Cisneros’ works: “In different ways and to different degrees, the women and men Sandra Cisneros portrays in her texts struggle to resist incorporation by the dominant class and culture. Additionally, the women of *Mango Street* and the women “hollering” their defiance against patriarchy constraints offer resistance strategies in the face of domination by Chicano and Mexicano men, as well as by the ruling class and dominant race. The configurations found in Cisneros’ work elaborate in simple yet poetic language a theory of praxis in which activist Chicanas situate themselves as materialist women of color.” (Saldivar-Hull 104)

In fact, Sonia Saldivar’s *Feminism on The Border*, one of the most contemporary studies to look at, transcends the traditional critical texts *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa, *Women Singing in the Snow* by Tey Diana Rebolledo and *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* by Ana Castillo. Saldivar-Hull covers Chicana literature written during the 90s and her critical essays offer a deep insight, which can easily be incorporated to class discussions about Chicana literature to help create a conscience from where to fight feminist and literary conventions. Crucial to developing a discussion about gender and sexuality in Chicana literature is Butler’s theory of gender

performativity. It acquires special importance from the light of the autobiography and the conformation of a gay identity.

Their first homosexual experience, the fear of coming out in a traditional, Catholic and patriarchal community where: “the stereotype of the passively religious Chicana advocated by the domineering Chicano men who profit from having passive women around them to promote their own personal agendas” (Saldivar-Hull, 31) is strongly supported by the Catholic Church, meant a powerful act of resistance and defiance from which Hence, teaching Chicana literature from a queer perspective creates an opportunity to fight homophobia and patriarchy. Moraga teaches how heterosexual assumptions erase Chicana lesbian subjectivity (112). Explanations of Anzaldúa’s borderlands where “los atravesados live”: “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over or go through the confines of the ‘normal’.” (Anzaldúa: 1987, 3).

As early as 1979, Anzaldúa and Moraga edited *This Bridge Called my Back*, anthology where they, among other women writers of color, attempted to change the belief that the term lesbian has to be taken as an insult, a word that belongs to the white world and as such has to be avoided. By opening a new literary space where these writers could express their ideas and feelings without fearing discrimination or rejection, they created a model and precedent for other women belonging to professional spheres to speak up and abandon the fear of rejection and annihilation that had accompanied same sex relationships before. Both Anzaldúa and Moraga partake in the tradition of sisterhood initiated by bell hooks, who supports that differences unite women instead of separating them: “by learning one another’s cultural codes and respecting our differences we felt a

sense of community, of Sisterhood.” (54) She also affirms that respecting diversity does not mean uniformity or sameness but the force of a group that becomes necessary when fighting against patriarchal and homophobic institutions. Moraga insists on her alliance with Women of Color and Third World Women in *Longing in the War Years* as the most suitable vehicle for Chicana lesbian politics. Emma Perez, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Demetria Martínez and the above mentioned Mónica Palacios are some of the Chicana lesbian writers publishing extensively and searching for a place in contemporary American literature.

This Bridge we Call Home, edited by Anzaldúa and Keating in 2003 (the last anthology that Anzaldúa co-edited) revisits the question of the secondary place that women writers of color still occupy in the American literary sphere; both editors keep feeling in this essay collection the need to claim for a voice to be heard and for visibility among the editorial world although Third Woman Press and Bilingual Press have opened their doors to Chicana lesbian writers. This new Bridge compiles, among other testimonies, the reaction of many lesbian women of color to the reading and studying of *This Bridge Called my Back*, experience which meant a light in the narrow passage towards admitting their sexuality. It records the transformation of women such as Renée Martínez who found that focusing on the intersection of her former divided identities she could “become a Woman of Peace” leaving behind the weapons of the warrior. At the same time, the trend to call for a union, following hook’s postulates of sisterhood continues in this Bridge: “My commitment to peace also grew as I broadened my activism to include more diverse groups. I returned to the table with white feminists and heterosexuals, engaging them as allies, not adversaries. I tried to find commonalties,

build stronger and more authentic coalitions. I tried not to define myself, the world, and my vision according to the dominant society. I stopped focusing so much on the injustice, and began looking for future possibilities” (Renée M. Martínez, 48).

The fact that this commemorative anthology has been published and that the editors felt the necessity to compile the essays of third world people means that the journey traveled from *This Bridge Called my Back* until now, although long and fruitful, is still insufficient for Chicana lesbians, and Latina lesbians in general, to be considered part of the curriculum in most feminist anthologies and courses on Women Studies. This new space that is being constructed, where hybridity and diversity reign will help instructors avoid “appropriation” and encourage “proliferation of information” (Anzaldúa: 1990, xxi) about Latina lesbian writers.

It also means that women in the academia, instructors who prepare and teach courses on American literature and Women Studies have an important task to accomplish in our classrooms: as long as we incorporate diversity to our courses and firmly believe that they belong in them we contribute to eradicate discrimination and abuse among our sisters, which at large is the fight of Women Studies, to create a space where “creatrices”, independently of their race, class, ethnicity, gender or sexual adscription, can move at ease.

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