

**DOING WORK THAT MATTERS: THE IMPACT OF GLORIA
ANZALDÚA'S *BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA*:
*THE NEW MESTIZA***

Norma E. Cantú
University of Texas at San Antonio

ABSTRACT: I've broken down this brief essay into three sections: first, I offer a very brief biography of Anzaldúa, and the trajectory of the more than twenty years since the book's publication, including the founding of an organization that continues the work of Anzaldúa's life project. Secondly because this paper interrogates how *Borderlands* has radically changed the way we conduct certain areas of scholarly work, I look at some specific areas where this is evident and include an example of how Anzaldúa's coining or reclaiming of certain terms like *mestizaje* and *facultad* laid the groundwork for later work, as she delineated a path for spiritual activism. This leads to my final point: that the book shifts epistemological and ontological frameworks, functioning as a paradigm shift as described by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), a paradigm shift that we need as we are in a time of transition, politically and socially in our globalized world.

Keywords: Gloria Anzaldúa, spiritual activism, epistemological and ontological framework.

**TRABAJANDO ESTA CUESTIÓN: EL IMPACTO DE *BORDERLANDS/LA
FRONTERA: THE NEW MESTIZA* DE GLORIA ANZALDÚA**

RESUMEN: He dividido este breve ensayo en tres secciones: primero, ofrezco una breve biografía de Anzaldúa, y la trayectoria de más de veinte años desde la publicación del libro, incluyendo la fundación de una organización que continúa el trabajo del proyecto vital de Anzaldúa. En segundo lugar, debido a que este escrito interroga el modo en que *Borderlands* ha cambiado

radicalmente la manera en que abordamos ciertas áreas en el trabajo escolar, examino algunas áreas específicas en las que esto es evidente, e incluyo un ejemplo de cómo la creación o recuperación de ciertos términos por parte de Anzaldúa como *mestizaje* y *facultad* puso la base para un trabajo posterior, ella delineó un sendero para un activismo espiritual. Esto conduce a mi punto final: que el libro modifica el marco epistemológico y ontológico, funcionando como un cambio de paradigma tal como lo describe Thomas Kuhn en *La Estructura de las Revoluciones Científicas* (1962), un cambio de paradigma que necesitamos porque estamos en un tiempo de transición, política y social, en nuestro mundo globalizado.

Palabras clave: Gloria Anzaldúa, activismo espiritual, marco epistemológico y ontológico.

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987), [Hereafter, I will refer to it as *Borderlands*] the path-breaking book by Gloria Anzaldúa redefined Chicano/a Studies and other area studies such as Women's and Border Studies even as it impacted numerous disciplines from geography and political science to literary studies and philosophy. I've broken down this brief essay into three sections: first, I offer a very brief biography of Anzaldúa, and the trajectory of the more than twenty years since the book's publication, including the founding of an organization that continues the work of Anzaldúa's life project. Secondly because this paper interrogates how *Borderlands* has radically changed the way we conduct certain areas of scholarly work, I look at some specific areas where this is evident and include an example of how Anzaldúa's coining or reclaiming of certain terms like *mestizaje* and *facultad* laid the groundwork for later work, as she delineated a path for spiritual activism. This leads to my final point: that the book shifts epistemological and ontological frameworks, functioning as a paradigm shift as described by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), a paradigm shift that we need as we are in a time of transition, politically and socially in our globalized world. Because I use the Anzaldúan concept of writing and of knowledge formation as autohistoria, or life writing, I have written this paper as a testimonio, that is, I insert my voice and my story into the analysis of the book and of Anzaldúa's work. I conclude with a few comments on how Anzaldúa's book continues to change lives.

I was born and have lived all my life in the area of South Texas that is the inspiration for Gloria Anzaldúa's book, *Borderlands*. It is not surprising then, that when I first heard and subsequently read the book, I recognized it for the life-defining, path-breaking, paradigm-shattering text that it has proven to be. By the way, I first heard about the book about 20 years ago at an MLA when my now-colleague Sonia Saldivar Hull cited the work in her paper. Reading *Borderlands* was transformative for me as it has been for many others. As a

woman of color academic it was the first time I found in an academic setting, a voice that spoke to my own experience and that relied on that experience to theorize about the larger world from a feminist and class conscious grounding. While the book itself has become iconic precisely because it speaks to the particular border reality, it also has implications for the larger crises that women face in and out of academia. Although Anzaldúa lived in south Texas and in fact was a university student at the same time I was, we didn't meet until she was living in California and I had come back to South Texas to teach at a small upper level university then Laredo State University, now, Texas A&M International University. In retrospect, I realize that the conditions of our non-meeting are precisely at the core of the work. The material conditions of Chicanas in the 60s and 70s in south Texas, with the historical legacy of lynching, of isolation from the hegemonic centers, were such that the two of us seeking to do similar work did not meet.

Anzaldúa was born in 1940 *in* a ranch settlement, or *Rancheria*, called Jesus Maria in the Valley of South Texas, her family later moved to a hamlet not much larger called Hargill; she and her family were migrant workers, thus her early education was sporadic, but it stabilized after moving to Hargill where she finished eighth grade; subsequently she was bused to Edinburg, Texas to attend high school; she stayed in Edinburg to attend Pan American University where she earned her B.A in 1969; after a stint teaching in south Texas, she pursued and earned an M.A. in English and Education from the University of Texas, Austin in 1972. This fact alone is evidence of her tenacity and her uniqueness, for education was hard to come by and many of her classmates dropped out or at best finished high school. Upon graduation she set out to impact the lives of others who like herself came from rural impoverished areas. As a teacher, she worked with migrant students, traveling with the migrant families who were on their way from Texas to the Midwest as part of a migrant education program. Thus she became the director of bilingual and migrant education in Indiana.

The choices were limited in the 1960s in South Texas, for those of us who aspired to a college education: Education or Business were often the only options, that is, universities like Laredo State offered only these two majors. The offerings at what is now UT-Pan American were not as limited, yet Chicanas who like Anzaldúa sought to make a difference in her community often chose education as a major. While Anzaldúa pursued and managed to earn a graduate degree, that was not the case for many of her classmates who stayed in the valley teaching in public schools.

Frustrated with the doctoral program at UT that refused to allow her to pursue Chicana/o literature as a subject of study, she left Texas and settled in California, where she began a project of resistance through her writing and her editorial work. It is after she has moved away from the Texas that she begins the work as coeditor of a number of significant anthologies. In *This Bridge Called my Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color* (1981), co-edited with Cherrie

Moraga, she brings together other women of color in response to the racism she finds in white women's feminist groups. Her anthology *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990), continues this work. In the very thorough introductions and in essays published in these and in the last of the anthologies, *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (2002) she develops a theory that lays the ground for what becomes the basis for a complex epistemological and critical framing often referred to as Anzaldúan thought. It is *Borderlands*, however, her single-authored mixed genre narrative that secures her a place in American letters, not necessarily because it adheres to the tenets often associated with the canonical texts but because of her defiance in putting together a text where a borderlands ethos is centered, moved from the margins to the center.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera* she lays out the tenets of border theory, but it is not just an analysis and exploration of the geopolitical border where she grew up but the borders at multiple levels, class, gender and sexuality, ethnicity, nationality and even the borders we inhabit within our own contradictions. Also notable are the anthologies *Making Face/Making Soul* and *This Bridge We Call Home* the anthologies that cemented her reputation and that set forth a feminist sisterhood across women of color feminists. In addition to these books and her publications—including children's books—some of her unpublished work is now available in the *Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* beautifully edited by Ana Louise Keating and published by Duke University Press. In exploring Anzaldúan thought from an international perspective we find that *Borderlands* is probably the most often quoted and used especially because the philosophy that is espoused therein resonates as the borders are being erected or brought down in other spots in the world. But, I will return to this point later. I now turn to the establishment of an organization to further Anzaldúa's work.

To continue Anzaldúa's life project, the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa was founded in 2006. After witnessing several sessions at the MLA and ASA packed with students and scholars eager and hungry to discuss her work, it was obvious to me that there was enough interest to warrant a venue, a place to share our ideas and to continue her life's work. The goal of the organization is to continue the work and to bring together all who are working with her ideas. The association held its first symposium on Anzaldúa in November 2007 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the publication of *Borderlands*. A full fledged conference, titled *El Mundo Zurdo*, followed 18 months later on the anniversary of her passing, May 15, 2009. The second *El Mundo Zurdo* conference followed on November 6-8, 2010 and the third is scheduled for May 2012. The scholars who present brave and exciting papers at these conferences deal with Anzaldúa's work in five broad areas: education, spirituality, border studies, literary studies, and gender and sexuality studies. The 2009 conference had as a theme Art and Performance and the 2012 conference theme is Transformation.

It is clear that *Borderlands* has radically impacted various areas of scholarship. In terms of area studies, such as Women's Studies, Chicana/o and Border Studies, we find that Anzaldúa offers a critique and a theorizing that affords us a new lens for analysis. *Borderlands* the book, reframes the border as a construct and as a theory of liminality. Serendipitously it foregrounded the concept of "border" just as the real geopolitical border was coming into the forefront as the immigration issues surfaced as major points in the political arena. The book works in a number of ways to reshape various disciplinary and area studies. Basing much of her work on *Borderlands*, Chicana historian Emma Pérez, for example, urges that through a process of recovery of our feminist history, we "move beyond colonialist history by implementing the decolonial imaginary with a third space feminist critique to arrive finally at post-coloniality, where postnational identities may surface." This third space Chicana feminist space is similar to the "Borderlands" or Nepantla that Anzaldúa describes in her writings. We could also here add Chela Sandoval's third space feminism and her concept of the differential consciousness, which adds tools to Anzaldúan thought to offer a Chicana third space feminist critique. These are but two texts that reveal the ways Anzaldúan thought has transformed women's studies, particularly Chicana Studies and in Pérez's case, the way historians treat Chicana history. The numerous dissertations that use Anzaldúan theoretical frames in women's studies and in other area studies attest to the ways that *Borderlands* has impacted academic conversations around issues of identity, language, and sexuality.

Another clear example of the impact of *Borderlands* appears in how it presents new words and redefines words found in Spanish vernacular folk culture. Such is the case with the term "mestizaje" that particularity of Mexican hybrid culture that renders "la raza cosmica" as Vasconcelos coined the mixture of European and Indigenous, the goal of a population project begun during the conquest of Mexico by the Europeans. The book's subtitle, *The New Mestiza* already sets up an expectation. And it delivers. In addition, the book foregrounds concepts such as "La Facultad" and "El Mundo Zurdo" that are perhaps more specific to a queer analysis. So for Queer Studies as well as for Chican@ studies, the book offers a vocabulary and a theorizing project useful for our scholarly work. Anzaldúa calls for a more inclusive and more expansive view of groups and group identity. At one point she says that the goal is to stand on both sides of the river at once—in other words, she asks metaphorically that we position ourselves in both the center and the margin, all at once. Her observations of the role of women in general and of lesbians, particularly lesbians of color, is central to her revisioning of society and of our concept of identity. Finally, the impact of the book goes beyond the usual academic, ontological or knowledge building function to what Anzaldúa calls a spiritual activism that she more fully develops in subsequent publications. Nevertheless the seeds of that discussion are laid out in *Borderlands*. As a spiritual activist her work is not just of the

mind but of the spirit and her deep training in spiritual matters joins the two. In some ways, she does for our scholarship what Laura Rendón's new book *Sentipensante Pedagogy* seeks to do for the academic classroom.

Scholars in Europe are engaged and actively using her theories and they are theorizing their current conditions and finding new ways to access the complexities and seeming simplicity of border theory. It is not surprising that the international scholarly community, especially feminist scholars, uses *Borderlands* as well, finding that the book resonates for them. The current deterritorializing of a vast number of people across the globe demands new theorizing and new ways of looking at how nation states respond to migrants into their territory. As evidence of how *Borderlands* hits home, as it were, with many situations across the globe, I cite the work of various scholars and their work. Their presence at the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa conference in May 2009 impelled me to include a discussion of the impact of Anzaldúa's work beyond our insular academic world. Scholars from 8 different countries working in various aspects of Anzaldúa's work presented thought provoking and challenging papers at the conference. In addition an Italian scholar, Paola Zaccaria prepared a documentary film on the border and on Anzaldúa in particular; it was shown at the conference and subsequently at various venues in Europe and the U.S. It is exciting to read and study this work by our feminist colleagues outside of the U.S., for it highlights the universality of the issues raised by *Borderlands* from what Anzaldúa called linguistic terrorism, the variants of machismo, the brutal gay bashing and the idea of "home" for queers—Anzaldúa chastises her own community's intolerance, in fact she comments that for a while she thought *homophobia* meant fear of going home. As countries across the globe wrestle with the conundrum that immigration presents and with a growing presence of queer citizens demanding equal rights, *Borderlands* offers a look into the heart of the matter. Now, I turn to a brief overview of the work of scholars who are doing work at an international level.

Paola Bacchetta Professor of Women's Studies at UC Berkeley writes and I quote: "In France, as I wrote in my essay for the conference, nothing in Chicana feminism had been translated for a long time. But now, I am translating a piece by Gloria with Jules Falquet ...besides that, there is increasing interest in Gloria's work. Over the past year or so she has been read by some feminists and lesbians of color who read English. Also, she has been recently cited by a group called Le Peuple qui Manque (The Missing People). Once Gloria's work is translated it will be widely accessible to those in France and the francophone world who do not have the privilege of reading English."

And Smadar Lavie who won the 2009 Gloria Anzaldúa prize at ASA focuses on the impact of Anzaldúa's work on Muslim women's studies. Rebecca Torstrick in *The Limits of Coexistence*, offers an empirically rich ethnography on a mixed Mizrahi-Palestinian city in the borderlands area north of Palestine/Israel, using an Anzaldúan framework for her analysis. Antonia Oliver Roder and Maria

Henriquez in Spain have worked on Anzaldúan scholarship; the former in *Border Transits: Literature and Culture across the Line. Bordlands en "Crossroads and Battlegrounds"* (Rodopi), and the latter in her dissertation on autobiographical writing. Carmen Caliz in her book, *Writing from the Borderlands*, has written about Anzaldúa's poetry—found in *Borderlands*. These are but a few of a number of scholars who are studying the immigrant phenomenon in Spain using Anzaldúan ideas. I already mentioned the film by Italian Paola Zaccaria. In addition, numerous scholars in Europe and in the Americas—in the Czech Republic, in Italy, in Poland and in Mexico—are working with Anzaldúan concepts in their own work. Papusa Molina in Merida and Claire Joysmith at the UNAM both teach and write about Anzaldúa in Mexico. I posit that Anzaldúa's book, through the epistemological and ontological frameworks it presents, constitutes a paradigm shift that is sorely needed as we are in a time of transition, politically, socially, and spiritually in our globalized world. Anzaldúa's work is not to be passively received, for she urges, especially in her later essays where she develops a transnational framework for "doing work that matters" (*One Wound*, 102), that we become engaged with the project of transforming society. From her earliest work to the last piece that was published Anzaldúa's aim was to do work that matters. Perhaps because Anzaldúa grew up along the border, a third space, a transnational space, her life formations shaping her interest in bridges, she saw the world from that perspective of the Border, the space in-between. Unfortunately, the severe and harsh conditions of that border where she and I grew up still exist.

The border wall that is going up between Mexico and the US is but the most recent manifestation of a militarized and ugly reality. The predicament of immigrant populations in various cities and countries attracts scholars trying to understand and negotiate the oppressive conditions faced by these abject subjects of the state. In some ways, *Borderlands* asks readers to consider these conditions. But aside from this earlier application of her work, it is the later writings that offer models. Especially her essay "now let us shift" serves the needs of contemporary activists looking for the space, that third space, that nepantla where difference can be negotiated; it is the path to *conocimiento* that she lays out for her readers that most strikes me as a path to transformation whether at the local, national or international level. Maybe we can achieve world peace after all. In her essay in *One Wound for Another* (2001) she reminds us of the power of the individual to impel the many to cause a rhizomic shift. Each one of us has the potential to change the sentience of the world" (*Wound* 101) she claims.

Anzaldúa died of diabetes complications on May 15, 2004 in Santa Cruz, California. Her body was brought back to South Texas and is buried in the small cemetery in the town that shaped her, Hargill, Texas. It is a desolate place with a few mesquite trees that offer little shade. Under the relentless sun we can hear the cicadas and the common centzontles, the wild birds of the area. Hardly

a breeze blows. While her physical body lies under that arid, clay soil, under the hot Texas sun, her spirit lives on in her words and touch us and urge us to continue doing work that matters.

References

ANZALDÚA, Gloria (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute.

KUHN, Thomas S. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.