AZTLÁN AS A PALIMPSEST: FROM CHICANO NATIONALISM TOWARD TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM IN ANZALDUÁ'S BORDERLANDS

Brenda Watts
Southwest Missouri State University Springfield, MO

Abstract

Although it has long been one of the founding concepts of Chicano identity, explored as myth, history and as a cultural utopia to be achieved in works by many Chicano writers, the idea of Aztlán presented by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales in “El plan espiritual de Aztlán” is not the same as when presented by later Chicano writers, most notably Gloria Anzaldúa. In Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, a key work of Chicana feminism, borderlands theory, queer theory and transnational feminism, Anzaldúa articulates a politics of Aztlán. Using Daniel Cooper Alarcón’s concept of Aztlán as a metaphorical palimpsest, I argue that earlier Chicano movement views of Aztlán resurface in Borderlands, reasserting foundational concepts of Chicano nationalism at the same time that Anzaldúa rewrites them in her own feminist critique and reworking of the Chicano Movement to create a space for a transnational feminist practice. Although explicitly denying the utility of latinidad as a unifying concept for achieving political and social change, Anzaldúa does argue for a new mestiza consciousness that opens up the nationalist theories of Chicano identity to the space of the transnational.

Keywords

Aztlán; Chicano; transnational; feminism; latinidad; Anzaldúa
The idea of Aztlan – the reputed home of the Aztecs before they founded Tenochtitlan – has long been one of the founding concepts of Chicano identity, explored as myth, as history, and as utopian goal in works by many Chicano writers. Its importance to the Chicano Movement and the literary growth that the movement produced can be seen in many foundational documents, beginning with “El plan espiritual de Aztlan” (Gonzales, 1969). Nevertheless, the idea of Aztlan presented in these early texts is not the same Aztlan presented in works by later writers, most notably Gloria Anzaldua, in her seminal 1987 work, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. Although she describes notions of latinidad as not enough in and of themselves to overcome racism, sexism and homophobia (87), in Borderlands, Anzaldua expands on a purely nationalistic construction of Chicana identity, to encompass a larger representation of its relevance for all Latinos’ identities. In Borderlands, Anzaldua theorizes Aztlan as a new geographical, spiritual and intellectual homeland for border crossers of all races and ethnicities, while still perpetuating its mythic status as a location of Chicano identity.

Daniel Cooper Alarcon (1997) calls the legend of Aztlan, “[p]erhaps the most enduring legacy of the Chicano movement”(10). Cooper Alarcon asserts that like history itself, the idea of Aztlan is a metaphorical palimpsest in constant process of change and revision (3). In describing it as a metaphorical palimpsest, Cooper Alarcon traces its appearances in different texts from Mesoamerican and colonial histories of Mexico to key texts of the US Chicano Movement, noting the political and cultural importance of each revision, each modifying the mythic idea of Aztlan without obliterating its earlier significance.

Aztlan first appears in Aztec mythology as the ancient home of the Aztec nation to the north of Tenochtitlan (Cooper Alarcon, 1997, 5). It is mentioned in the Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme, first published in 1581, written by the Spanish missionary Diego Duran (25). Similarly, John Chavez’s The Lost Land, a history of the southwestern United States, describes how a practice of referring to the area that is now the US Southwest as Aztlan developed during the 16th century (Chavez, 1991, 8). Portraying the Southwest as an Edenic place of immense wealth, populated by mythical inhabitants, came to an end in the 17th century, as later explorers rejected the idea of Aztlan when reality failed to live up to the myths.

The idea of Aztlan all but disappeared as a political and cultural concept until its rediscovery by Chicano Movement activists. Cooper Alarcon (1997) traces its re-emergence to a specific event, the Chicano National Liberation Youth Conference in Denver in 1969, where Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales presented “El plan espiritual de Aztlan” (22). Its revolutionary nature is quickly apparent in its opening paragraph, which states: “In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal ‘gringo’ invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlan from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land
of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny” (Plan 1). The document goes on to identify Aztlan as both “the northern land” of the Chicanos and as the independent nation that inhabits it. Gonzales states: “Aztlan belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops and not to the foreign Europeans. We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the bronze continent” (1). In this manner, Chicanos are imagined as both the rightful inheritors of a pre-Columbian indigenous past and as cultural brothers to all Latinos. The foreign Europeans he describes are the Anglo majority of the United States, whom he condemns for their oppression and exploitation of and racism against the Chicano people. In his presentation, Gonzales highlights the key role of nationalism in the struggle for achieving the goals set forth in the plan, which states unambiguously that “Nationalism as the key to organization transcends all religious, political, class and economic factions or boundaries. Nationalism is the common denominator that all members of La Raza can agree upon” (2). “El plan espiritual de Aztlan” unites the Chicano people by imagining them as “a nation autonomous and free – culturally, socially, economically, and politically” (3). Although the idea of Aztlan is inherently transnational in nature in originating in the mythic Aztec homeland that predates both Mexican and US territorial claims to what is now the US Southwest, the centrality of cultural nationalism to the Chicano Movement is insisted upon in “El plan espiritual de Aztlan,” downplaying the transnational origins of the idea of Aztlan.

Ignacio M. García (1997) specifies the importance of Gonzales’ epoch-making speech, which turned Aztlan into an organizing metaphor for Chicano Movement activists, allowing them to unite heterogeneous elements under one political and social ethos of self-identity and community empowerment, while advocating racial solidarity, social, and political change for Mexican-Americans (García, 1997, 3). Chicanos rewrote Aztlan as their spiritual and geographical home. It became the founding myth of chicanismo, which García defines as “the collective defensive and offensive mechanism that the Mexican American community uses to combat racism, discrimination, poverty, and segregation, and to define itself politically and historically” (4). According to García, by urging the young activists to retake Aztlan, Gonzales fought a history of cultural stereotypes of Mexican Americans as violent, passive underachievers, whose lack of success in achieving the “American Dream” could be traced to fundamental flaws in their historical and cultural make-up. Gonzales replaced those negative images with images of a proud Aztec past, present success and hope for the future.

Cooper Alarcón (1997) agrees with García about the importance of “El plan espiritual de Aztlan” in reformulating the idea of Aztlan for the US Chicano Movement, and about the centrality of Aztlan as an organizing metaphor for movement activists. However, he also stresses the changing relationship of the
Chicano community to the idea of Aztlán. According to Cooper Alarcon, while the idea of Aztlán has been used to legitimate Chicano political identity, functioning as a powerful unifying symbol, it has also been criticized as being ahistorical, monolithic, and unresponsive in its emphasis on collective experience over individual differences (5). He lists the ways in which the idea of Aztlán has “been used to obscure and elide:”

1. the disturbing tendency to focus only on the relationship between Chicano communities and the dominant Anglo culture, at the expense of any discussion of the complex, diverse character of Chicanos and their relationship with other ethnic groups;
2. the tendency to focus on the Southwest, minimizing the attention paid to Chicanos who live in other geographic regions;
3. competing claims to the Southwest — which Aztlán is often intended to be synonymous with — by Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans;
4. the ongoing dialect between Chicano and Mexican culture(s) and the effects on these culture(s) of continued Mexican emigration to the United States; and, as the work of Norma Alarcon suggests,
5. the complex inter-relationship of subjectivity, agency, and privilege. (8–9)

Although Cooper Alarcon (1997) only hints at it in mentioning the work of Norma Alarcon, one of the key failings of early Chicano views on Aztlán and of the early Chicano movement itself was its denial of the equal importance of women within the revolution. Deborah L. Madsen (2000) explains that during the height of the Chicano movement, “The gendered voice of the Chicana was marginalized as issues of racial discrimination took precedence over those of gender” (17). Alma M. García (1997) describes how, as the Chicano Movement failed to take gender oppression into account, this lack of attention to Chicanas and their needs “gave rise to a parallel movement of ideological opposition” — Chicana feminism (3). She describes this as a further development of chicanismo itself, enlarging its ideals to include a focus on gender as well as race oppression (3). As described by García, these Chicana activists did not reject the idea of Aztlán, but rather expanded it to include a feminist focus. Madsen describes the importance of these writers in developing a new Chicana feminism that worked to bridge the gap between feminism and the Chicano Movement. She cites Anzaldúa as one of several Chicana writers who were equally disenfranchised by the patriarchal and homophobic Chicano movement and the often racist and predominantly Anglo-American women’s movement of the same era (19). Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, along with the groundbreaking 1981 anthology which she co-edited with Cherrie Moraga, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, became the founding texts of a new Chicana feminism, a feminism which reaches out to the Chicano community, remaking the Movement as it seeks to include those female and queer voices silenced in its discourse (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1981). Alarcon (1998) describes how this new Chicana feminism has reinvigorated the
Chicano Movement (372). This conceptual development applied also to other ethnic and progressive communities in the United States that sought to achieve many of the aims of the original Chicano Movement through a process of dialogue and coalition-building. García describes this shared struggle, which focused on “the multiple sources of oppression generated by race, gender and social class” (4). Through the work of Chicanas and other feminist women of color, the Chicano Movement could thus be re-envisioned as part of a larger struggle for civil rights and economic and social justice in the United States, one that included the civil rights struggle of African Americans, the feminist movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement. García concludes: “Thus, a Chicana feminist movement represented a struggle that was both nationalist and feminist. Ultimately, the inherent constraints and cross-pressures facing Chicana feminists within the Chicano movement led to the broader development of Chicana feminist thought” (4). As Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan, and Minoo Moallem make clear in their introduction to Between Woman and Nation (Alarcón et al., 1999), “Women are both of and not of the nation” (12) and as such are both policed and limited by a nationalist discourse that seeks to incorporate them in their role as mothers while simultaneously denying them recognition as citizens, and are also resistant to that discourse. Cynthia Enloe (1989) argues that the tendency of nationalist ideologies to ignore women’s needs and experiences makes women more likely to organize politically at other than the national level, which can be clearly seen in the development of Chicana feminism as described by García. Enloe states that paying attention to gender would profoundly change politics on the local, national, and international levels by revealing how those levels are connected in women’s experiences: “If more nation-states grew out of feminist nationalists’ ideas and experiences, community identities within the international political system might be tempered by cross-national identities” (64). While Enloe describes cross-national identities, I believe her idea corresponds to what other scholars prefer to call the transnational. By reaching out to the possibility of dialogue and coalition with other feminists, both inside and outside the United States, Chicana feminists opened up the cultural nationalist focus of the Chicano Movement to create an increasingly transnational ideology of identity. These feminists re-imagined Aztlán, exchanging its isolationism and sexism for a new, broader interpretation of a Chicano homeland. In The Aztec Palimpsest, Cooper Alarcón calls for a new use of Aztlán as a metaphorical palimpsest in order to counteract the ahistorical and homogenizing tendencies of the use of the myth of Aztlán in Chicano Movement discourse of the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, I argue, he is calling for nothing other than the acceptance of new definitions of Aztlán, such as that already developed by Anzaldúa in Borderlands.

Laura Elisa Pérez (1999) describes the continued importance of Aztlán to both Chicana and Chicano cultural practices, while at the same time
recognizing the differences between them: “Constructed through the willful acts of a collective Chicana/o imagination, Aztlan exists as an invisible nation within the engulfing ‘imagined community’ of dominant US discourse” (19). Pérez refers to Benedict Anderson’s (1991) view of the nation as an imagined community, created by the readers of the same texts. She affirms that although Anderson’s definition refers to nation-states, his description of the construction of those nation-states as imagined communities could also refer to the creation of Aztlan (40). Describing the importance of the term nation in reference to the idea of Aztlan, she says:

While the struggles continue, the collective power claimed by the Native American, the Chicana/o, the African American, and the Queer defining themselves as nothing less than nations has produced the real effects of greater cultural and physical survival of these oppressed and ‘minoritized’ groups, while transforming the nation into a more democratic one. These alternately imagined and lived nations have transformed our understanding and experience of what the nation means. (41)

Although their ideas of Aztlan are clearly different, the seed of that difference can be seen in both the original Chicano Movement theorizations of Aztlan and in Anzaldúa’s rewritings of them.

In what ways does the idea of Aztlan presented in Borderlands/La Frontera differ from the definitions of Aztlan put forth by the early Chicano Movement activists who authored El plan espiritual de Aztlan? Employing Cooper Alarcón’s concept of Aztlan as a palimpsest, an historical and cultural text in the process of continual revision, I read Aztlan in Anzaldúa’s book as a refashioning of the Chicano homeland that differs from Chicano Movement depictions of Aztlan in addressing many of the very issues that Cooper Alarcón enumerates as being ignored by earlier activists, without totally rewriting their nationalist focus. Specifically, Anzaldúa rewrites the Chicano Movement idea of Aztlan in her formulation of a feminist transnational *mestiza* politics, focusing on ongoing issues of Mexican immigration, race, gender and culture throughout the United States. What is different in Borderlands is precisely that Anzaldúa envisions women and homosexuals of both sexes as constituents of her imagined community, in contrast to traditional nationalist discourses, which deliberately leave them “unimagined.”

The first chapter of Borderlands, “The Homeland, Aztlan/El otro México,” refers to the US Southwest not only as Aztlan, but also as *el otro México*, the other Mexico. Anzaldúa begins the chapter with a song lyric from Los Tigres del Norte that explains how the US Southwest is the other Mexico:

> El otro México que acá hemos construido
> el espacio es lo que ha sido
> territorio nacional.
Este esfuerzo de todos nuestros hermanos
y latinoamericanos que han sabido
progresar. (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1)

The lyric establishes the US Southwest as the other Mexico by referring to its construction by Latin American laborers, and then to how it formed part of the national territory of Mexico before 1848. Thus, Anzaldúa includes Latinos as well as Chicanos in her history of Aztlan. After briefly mentioning how Chicanos have seen the US Southwest, Aztlan, as their true homeland, Anzaldúa describes how the physical border between the US and Mexico divides the “Borderlands” and its people. She describes the border as a:

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a pueblo, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja

This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire (2–3).

Anzaldúa describes the steel curtain dividing Tijuana from San Diego, and the entire physical and political border between the United States and Mexico, as a wound that divides a people and culture that are essentially Mexican. According to Anzaldúa, in addition to creating divisions between people of the same culture, the border is an artificial construct that mars nature. She chronicles how the earth, the sea, and the wind cross the chain link fence at will:

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 (3).

Describing the image of the border as a wound, she depicts the steel fence posts ripping her flesh, splitting her apart. Spacing in the poem visually evokes the artificial space imposed by the border fence, as words which should only have one space between them, such as “me raja me raja” are further separated. She concludes:

This land was Mexican once,
was Indian always

Este el esfuerzo de todos nuestros hermanos
y latinoamericanos que han sabido
progresar. (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1)
and is.
And will be again (3).

In the separation in the line “And will be again,” Anzaldúa evokes the time between the present and the future when her vision is realized. She concludes the poem in Spanish, crossing linguistic and cultural borders as easily as she describes Mexican kids in Border Field Park crossing the chain link fence in order to retrieve their soccer ball in previous verses (2). Describing herself as a bridge between the dominant Anglo culture in the United States and the world of the wetback, the illegal immigrant, she nevertheless concludes by describing herself as culturally Mexican. This does not mean that she embraces a Mexican political identity, but rather a cultural one. The poem closes with a hopeful image of connections being made across the border. However, the lines “This land was Mexican once,/ was Indian always/ and is./ And will be again,” perhaps more clearly than any other, encapsulate her politics of Aztlan. The US Southwest is described not only as having Mexican and indigenous history and cultural traditions, but as being essentially Indian both now and in the future.

The vision of the US Southwest as Aztlan, both the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs and the cultural and geographical home of all Chicanos is repeated in the concluding paragraphs of the narrative first part of *Borderlands*, recalling the discourse of early Chicano nationalists. Anzaldúa describes how she and her family members labored in the field together, remembering “the four of us kids getting off the school bus, changing into our work clothes, walking into the field with Papá and Mamá, all six of us bending to the ground” (91). These images reveal the idea of Aztlan to be a palimpsest, a document continually erased and being remade in a process that blurs but does not completely destroy or cover up earlier notions of Aztlan; thus Anzaldúa’s theorization of Aztlan as an imagined political and cultural space reveals early Chicano Movement ideas of Aztlan as a clear part of its foundation. Repeated images of herself and her family members planting and harvesting crops and her conclusion that “Yes, the Chicano and the Chicana have always taken care of growing things and the land,” (91) echo and reinforce this key statement in “El plan espiritual de Aztlan:” “Aztlan belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops” (Plan 1). Anzaldúa’s repeated agricultural imagery thus reinforces a traditional politics of Aztlan, asserting her right to the land she has worked. Chicano nationalism is revealed as the roots of Anzaldúa’s feminist transnational politics.

However, Anzaldua differs from early Chicano Movement discourse in fully historicizing Aztlan, presenting it as in no way monolithic or ahistorical. Instead, she focuses on the region as being inhabited by a variety of peoples over time: the Indians who walked across the Bering Straits, descendants of the Cochise people, the Aztecs, their descendants, Spanish conquistadors, accompanied by Indians and mestizos, and finally Anglos who arrived in the area in the 1800s (Anzaldúa, 1987, 4–6). She describes current inhabitants of Aztlan
above all as mestizos, inheritors of indigenous, Anglo, and Mexican cultures and of the conflicts between them.

Critics have cited the singular importance of *Borderlands* in creating a new paradigm for understanding Chicana identity. María de los Angeles Torres (1998) credits Anzaldúa with forcing “a reexamination of the prevailing rigid categories of ethnicity and gender that had emerged from the 1960s” (177), while Chela Sandoval (1998) characterizes her new mestiza consciousness as being far more influential than any other type of Chicana feminism developed in the late 20th century (352), calling it “the contemporary imaginary that is reforming disciplinary canons” (353). She describes its singular importance as a type of differential criticism, which became the overriding strategy of US third world feminism (361) in its struggle to “equaliz[e] power on behalf of the colonized, the nation-, class-, race-, gender-, and sexually subordinated” (362).

I believe that as a contemporary imaginary, Anzaldúa’s borderlands theory exemplifies a transnational politics that reforms both literary and political space, arguing for a theoretical and political hybridity, or *mestizaje*, that blends elements from indigenous, Chicano, and Anglo cultures to create a new borderlands subjectivity. Anzaldúa (1987) describes the origins of a new mestizo race in the Conquest, and the subsequent decimation of the Indian populations along with the creation of a “new hybrid race” of both Indian and European descent (5). She acknowledges the influence of Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos’ (1966) view of *la raza cósmica* in her own theory of mestiza consciousness. She celebrates Vasconcelos thus:

> Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity. At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly ‘crossing over,’ the mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making – a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands (77).

Anzaldúa paraphrases Vasconcelos in her own elaboration of her theory of mestiza consciousness, rewriting and expanding upon his notion of a cosmic race. Like Vasconcelos’, her view of *mestizaje* is universal in referring to all racial mixtures in the Americas, and thus becomes an inclusive theory of ethnicity and identity that could easily support the notion of a broader Latino political and cultural subject. Nevertheless, it again reveals Chicano nationalist roots.

Anzaldúa’s positive reading of Vasconcelos is incomplete in failing to address the unfortunate Eurocentric, racist, and classist foundations that underlie his conceptualization of *mestizaje*, but her failure to do so is hardly unique. Instead, it is another example of a continuing legacy of earlier Chicano Movement texts in
Anzaldúa’s work. Luis A. Marentes (2000) describes the centrality of race to all of Vasconcelos’ writing, even before what he calls his later “utterly offensive racist and anti-Semitic ravings” (60), which followed his failed presidential campaign of 1928 (14). In these later works, Vasconcelos “concocted international conspiracies linking Jews, Protestants, Freemasons, Bolsheviks, and Wall Street bankers in an effort to rule the world, and expressed his admiration for the fascist regimes of Francisco Franco in Spain and Benito Mussolini in Italy” (Marentes, 2000, 15). Marentes summarizes the tendency of Vasconcelos’ readers to divide his works into an early revolutionary period of progressive ideals and a later period of increasing bigotry and paranoia, explaining that “many of those who are quick to condemn the later conservative Vasconcelos still celebrate his notion of a cosmic race as a pluralistic and all-inclusive understanding of Latin American race and culture” (103). He traces similar appropriations of Vasconcelos’ racist theorizations by indigenista proponents in Mexico, who embraced Vasconcelos’ notion of a cosmic race destined to outlast and outshine the Anglo race, exemplified by the United States (60).

This positive spin on Vasconcelos was continued in the 1960s and 1970s Chicano Movement, with the slogan that Vasconcelos composed in 1921 as the motto for the National University of Mexico, “Por mi raza hablará el espíritu appearing on the covers of the journal Aztlán and accompanying publications of the Plan de Santa Barbara,” a document developed as a result of a movement conference in 1969 that called for the creation of Chicano Studies programs in universities (Marentes, 2000, 61). When Anzaldúa begins her essay on what she terms a new mestiza consciousness, she chooses the words “Por la mujer de mi raza/hablará el espíritu” (77), paraphrasing Vasconcelos’ famous slogan, rephrasing it to emphasize the essentiality of gender to her argument. Like the Chicano Movement writers who preceded her, she borrows his terminology and positive view of mestizaje while ignoring the racist foundations of his conceptualization of a cosmic race. These are clearly seen in La raza cósmica, as Vasconcelos discusses what he terms “inferior races” and the eventual perfection of the species through their disappearance. He states: “Los tipos bajos de la especie serán absorbidos por el tipo superior. De esta suerte podría redimirse, por ejemplo, el negro, y poco a poco, por extinción voluntaria, las estirpes más feas irán cediendo el paso a las más hermosas” (52). Although he insists that the final result of this racial mixture will not be “precisamente el blanco” (52), he clearly privileges the Spanish side of the mestizo’s multicultural heritage, describing the Conquest in positive terms as the work of “grandes capitanes” all equal before the crown (26). Vasconcelos insists upon the importance of reclaiming and privileging this Spanish heritage, language, and culture, concluding that “Nosotros no seremos grandes mientras el español de la América no se sienta tan español como los hijos de España” (23). As expressed succinctly by Marentes, Vasconcelos’ writing “reveals a very Eurocentric conception of such a cosmic race, where the European races are the sole
possessors of science and history. Racial mixture functions almost exclusively as an aesthetic addition to a Latin and Catholic racial and cultural tradition, which overdetermines such a mixture by creating the necessary historical conditions for its appearance” (60). Can an antiracist theory of mestizaje based conceptually on racist underpinnings function for antiracist ends, or will it only reaffirm and fall victim to the racist foundation of its origins? One answer is seen in the success of the Plan of Santa Barbara, which was often published accompanied by Vasconcelos’ famous slogan. Mario Barrera (1988) credits the plan with the institution of many Chicano Studies programs in the southwest and Midwest, and the consolidation of various Chicano student organizations under the umbrella of MECHA (43). Another answer is seen in the success of Gloria Anzaldúa’s work and its profound influence on feminism, Chicano scholarship and border studies. An analysis of Anzaldúa’s development of what she terms her own reading of Vasconcelos’ idea of mestizaje in Borderlands reveals the significant differences between his concept of la raza cósmica and her new mestiza consciousness.

Although Anzaldúa bases her theory of mestizaje on Vasconcelos’ work, her formulations differ from his in privileging a conscious psychological and spiritual blending of cultures within each individual, a process that can occur in one generation, rather than the centuries-long selective breeding project that Vasconcelos advocates. She describes her own political, cultural, and spiritual mestizaje as an inner struggle between the various cultures that made her: “Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?” (78). Anzaldúa’s description of the inner turmoil of the mestiza differs clearly from Vasconcelos’ belief in the clear superiority and homogenizing influence of Spanish culture and Catholicism that he claims as cultural inheritance for the members of his cosmic race. Instead of privileging one culture over others, she describes how Chicanas receive multiple and opposing messages as commonly held beliefs of Anglo, Mexican, and indigenous cultures conflict, attacking each other. Anzaldúa insists that the work of the new mestiza is first to examine her own beliefs and multicultural history, deciding what to keep and what to abandon:

“She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of. Luego bota lo que no vale, los desmientos, los desencuentros, el embrutecimiento. Aguarda el juicio, bando y enraizado, de la gente antigua. This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths” (1987, 82).

This is also the process that Anzaldúa uses in appropriating Vasconcelos’ work for her own ends, abandoning the racist elements of his theory of
mestizaje while using his concept of a utopian spiritual process that would result in the creation of a new mestizo race to develop her own idea of a new mestiza consciousness.

Through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of a personal and cultural history and mythos, Anzaldúa is able to move forward from ambivalence to achieve what she terms the new mestiza consciousness. Anzaldúa describes the working of this new consciousness in utopian terms, heralding the willingness to embrace contradictions and working toward synthesis as an answer to the problems of racism, sexism, and homophobia. According to Anzaldúa: “A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us the end of rape, of violence, of war” (80). The new mestiza is “cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems” (78). The borderlands culture in which Anzaldúa was raised is neither coterminous with the larger Anglo culture of the United States nor with the dominant Mexican culture across the border. It is a hybrid culture, blending elements from both and combining them with indigenous beliefs and traditions specific to the “Borderlands.” The elements of this new border culture include language traditions (59), musical genres and typical foods (61) and a shared history of struggle as a people (63). Anzaldúa begins this history with the speeches and marches of César Chávez, followed by the publication of I Am Joaquín and the formation of Texas’s La Raza Unida party to signal the emergence of Chicano self-recognition as a people (63).

By describing the border zone as a geographical region with its own history and mestizo culture that is neither Mexico nor the United States, Anzaldúa crosses the political borders of nations, revealing them to be historical and political constructs that work to divide social identities. Anzaldúa’s new mestiza consciousness leads to a politics of mestizaje as well, as she calls for an end to racial prejudices, sexism, and homophobia. She insists:

“The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian – our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people… Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (87).

After this first step of resolving the inner struggle, the new mestiza then works to change society through a process of coalition building with like-minded people of all races and genders, regardless of class or national origin. While the inner struggle is one of rewriting history and myths, the external one is teaching and sharing these new foundations for a shared cultural experience. Again, Anzaldúa’s project differs radically from Vasconcelos’, although both focus on a rewriting of history. Vasconcelos begins his rewriting with a mythical Atlantean past predating indigenous American civilizations (20) and then establishes the importance of a
worldwide historical struggle between “los dos tipos humanos más fuertes y más disímiles: el español y el inglés” (21). Tracing the struggle through European history and through the colonization of the New World and what he describes as its eventual unforeseen domination by Anglo Saxons (31), he concludes with what he sees to be their fatal flaw: their failure to mix with people of other races and their actual extermination of indigenous peoples (32). In contrast with what he sees as the United States’ racist mission of domination, he proposes Latin America as a site of a divine mission: The creation of a new race that will replace all others, thus ending the cultural and political hegemony of the United States and the white race (33). In contrast, Anzaldúa does not describe physical mestizaje as an end in itself, nor does she seek to end political, ethnic and cultural differences in the Americas through her new mestiza consciousness. Instead, she calls for a recognition and celebration of these differences within a larger US society composed of people of all races and a subsequent change in US–Mexico relations. She begins her revision of history with the first migration of people across the Bering Straits, noting that “The oldest evidence of humankind in the US – the Chicanos’ ancient Indian ancestors – was found in Texas and has been dated to 35,000 B.C.” (1987, 4). She quickly follows this by identifying the first sign of civilization in the Americas as the “20,000-year-old campsites of the Indians who migrated through, or permanently occupied, the Southwest, Aztlan – land of the herons, land of whiteness, the Edenic place of origin of the Azteca” (4).

While Vasconcelos describes history itself as the creation, rise and fall of different races as each comes into power and eventually falls into decadence (20), Anzaldúa explains history’s importance as a powerful weapon in the struggle for political and social change within the United States: “The whites in power want us people of color to barricade ourselves behind our separate tribal walls so they can pick us off one at a time with their hidden weapons; so they can whitewash and distort history. Ignorance splits people, creates prejudices. A misinformed people is a subjugated people” (1987, 86). While Vasconcelos writes American history focusing on the struggle for dominance between Anglo Saxons to the north and the descendents of Spain and Portugal to the south (21), Anzaldúa’s rewriting of history is at once more personal and more specific, centered in the Río Grande valley in which she grew up. She traces its history from its mythic past and present as part of Aztlan, through its exploration and settling by “Spanish, Indian and mestizo ancestors” (1987, 5) beginning in the 16th century, illegal Anglo migration into Texas in the 1800s (6), and the loss of almost half of Mexico’s national territory, including Texas, in the US–Mexican War (7). She then traces her own family history in the Río Grande Valley, describing the effects of racism, drought, agribusiness, and economic crisis on the inhabitants of the valley that she calls “this borderland between the Nueces and the Río Grande” (90). She summarizes the valley’s history after the Conquest by stating: “This land has survived possession and ill-use by five countries: Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the US, the Confederacy, and
the US again. It has survived Anglo-Mexican blood feuds, lynchings, burnings, rapes, pillage” (90). While Vasconcelos describes the ancient indigenous Atlantean civilization of the Americas as the end of that race, because “En la Historia no hay retornos, porque toda ella es transformación y novedad. Ninguna raza vuelve; cada una plantea su misión, la cumple y se va” (30), Anzaldúa insists on the essential Indian nature of her homeland, concluding the prose section of Borderlands by repeating the lines “This land was Mexican once/ was Indian always/ and is./ And will be again” (1987, 91). In her insistence on a specifically indigenous border cultural identity that outlasts what she depicts as transitory political claims to her homeland, Anzaldúa most forcefully develops a politics of Aztlan.

I see Anzaldúa’s new mestiza consciousness as an example of a feminist transnational political subjectivity and practice. Her transnational politics are clearly seen as she discusses economics and migration in the “Borderlands.” Her feminism becomes clear in her special attention to the ways in which Mexican indigenous women who are poor and cross the political and cultural borders between Mexico and the United States are exploited by Anglo, Chicano, and indigenous cultures, as well as by the economic forces of transnational capital. Alarcón notes that many Chicana writers “explore their racial and sexual experience in poetry, narrative, essay, testimony, and autobiography through the evocation of indigenous figures” (375) in which “the Chicana position, previously ‘empty’ of meanings, emerges as one who has to ‘make sense’ of it all from the bottom through the recodification of the native woman” (376) thus conjoining historical representations of the native woman (la virgen de Guadalupe, la Malinche, la Llorona) with the present-day speaking Chicana subject (376). In Borderlands, Anzaldúa describes how patriarchal Mexican and Chicano cultures have subverted each figure: “Guadalupe to make us docile and enduring, la Chingada to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and la Llorona to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the virgen/puta (whore) dichotomy” (31). She works to break down this dichotomy, insisting on a positive vision of female sexuality, seeing la virgen de Guadalupe as “the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess” (30), la Malinche as having been betrayed by her culture rather than as being her culture’s betrayer (22), and la Llorona as both a representation of the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl (35) and also as an abject and rejected combination of the other two figures (30). She re-envisions each as a powerful mother of Chicano culture through her rewriting of ancient Aztec myths and her valorization of a spiritual and historical tradition based on indigenous beliefs rather than any institutionalized religion (37). Anzaldúa contrasts current and past abuses of power within the borderlands with a utopian vision of hope for the region and for its people, based on the myth of the US Southwest as Aztlan. The difference between Anzaldúa’s theorization of
Aztlan and the early formulations of Chicano movement activists is evident in her new mestiza consciousness, addressed not only to Chicanos but to all Latinos, American Indians, Blacks, Asians, and even Anglos. Although still nationalistic, Anzaldúa’s politics of Aztlan is also a politics of consensus-building and community formation beyond the boundaries of ethnicity and geographical location. In addition, where “El plan” calls for the unquestioning preservation of “cultural values of life, family, and home” (3), Anzaldúa examines the abuses and discrimination within these cultural values, calling her own culture to account for its misogyny and homophobia. Anzaldúa is particularly scornful of the way in which her culture has silenced and abused its women by requiring that they accept and accord with rigid gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality and motherhood. She requests a dialogue between Chicanos and Chicanas as well as a new vision of masculinity and a new men’s movement to end sexism (Anzaldúa, 1987, 84). In addition, Anzaldúa insists that Chicanos acknowledge and accept the contributions made to Chicano culture by gays and lesbians (85), whom she calls the “supreme crossers of cultures,” on account of their strong bonds with homosexuals throughout the world. She concludes: “The mestizo and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls” (85).

Although she clearly goes beyond early Chicano Movement views of Aztlan in her formation of a theory of mestiza consciousness, which addresses people both inside and outside the Chicano community, in other ways Anzaldúa does not stray far from the revolutionary ideals set forth in “El plan espiritual de Aztlan.” Her project remains a revolutionary one addressed first to Chicanas like herself, although admitting many others into the realm of its imagined community. Second, her project builds on and upholds many Chicano Movement ideals, including the defense and celebration of a unique Chicano history and culture within the United States. Finally, Anzaldúa (1987) presents herself as a revolutionary Chicana activist, addressing herself to “nosotros los mexicanos-Chicanos,” encouraging all Chicanos to continue the struggle begun in the Chicano Movement (63–64), to teach its history to new immigrant arrivals to the United States, and to learn the histories of Latin America in order to forge a new community (87). Although her ideas and goals are transnational, they are grounded in an earlier Chicano cultural nationalist myth and metaphor of Aztlan, an overarching metaphor that encompasses not only the border region of the US Southwest, but also a spiritual utopian homeland to be achieved when the goals of her new mestiza consciousness are met.

The idea of Aztlan theorized by Anzaldúa in Borderlands/La frontera addresses many of the issues described by Cooper Alarcón (1997) as being ignored in early Chicano Movement notions of Aztlan. First, Anzaldúa separates her conceptual “Borderlands” from the physical border zone she describes in South Texas (Anzaldúa, 1987, iii). This enlarges her theoretical
construct of Aztlan far beyond the geographic limits of the US Southwest. Second, by insisting on mestizaje as a basis for developing a new Chicana culture and conceptual framework, Anzaldúa breaks out of the Anglo/Chicano binary described by Cooper Alarcón to discuss the interrelated and mutually conflicting elements of Native American, Mexican, and Anglo culture. Third, she focuses on both the history of migration in the US Southwest and on its continued effects on both Mexico and the United States. Finally, by focusing on her own identity as a Chicana lesbian in building her notion of Aztlan, she envisions both women and homosexuals as citizens of her imagined community, thus deviating strongly from traditional nationalist imaginings of the nation based on compulsory heterosexuality and the traditional family structure. Nevertheless, because the idea of Aztlan, in the words of Cooper Alarcón (1997), is a palimpsest, Anzaldúa’s new theory inherits a nationalistic focus on the Chicano people and traditional Chicano values based on the importance of the community over the individual and the maintenance of or return to an idealized notion of an agrarian lifestyle. Although she seeks coalition with Native Americans, Asian Americans and African Americans and with new Latino immigrants to the United States, and includes Latinos as well as Chicanos in her history of Aztlan, her formulations never fully subsume Chicana identity in either a generalized identity as people of color in the United States or as Latinas, insisting on the specificity of Chicana identity.

In the fifth chapter of Borderlands, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Anzaldúa describes the evolution of Chicano Spanish in the border zone. She consistently differentiates between Chicanas and Latin American women, a difference that begins with language itself: “Their language was not outlawed in their countries. They had a whole lifetime of being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was a first language, taught in school, heard on radio and TV, and read in the newspaper” (58). In contrast with the Latin American women whom Anzaldúa describes as growing up immersed in Spanish, she describes Chicanas as speaking as many as eight different languages (55). Calling language a homeland, she insists upon the validity of each one, stating “I am my language” (59). In a later passage, she again stresses the specificity of her Chicana identity, describing people who use other labels, such as Spanish, Hispanic, Spanish-American, Mexican-American, Latin American, and Latin as “copping out” – acculturating and thus denying the particularity of their Chicano identity (62). Although Anzaldúa does state that the “Latinoist movement is good” she also insists that it is not enough, focusing instead on the historical and cultural specificity of Chicanos in her new inclusive theory of Aztlan (86). Rather than attempt to subsume Chicana identity under the umbrella of a larger shared Latino identity or political project, she seems to be incorporating Latino identity into a new politics of Aztlan itself as the “broader
communal ground” (87) shared by the constituents of her new imagined community.

With Anzalduá, the idea of Aztlan moves from Chicano nationalism toward transnational feminism without losing its emphasis on the values placed on home and the land so sacred to early Chicano movement activists, but enlarges its own definition to address the issues of global migration, transnational capital and shifting identities, insisting always on the fluidity and permeability of categorizations and definitions. This Aztlan is not the same Aztlan presented by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales at the Chicano National Liberation Youth Conference in 1969. Instead it is a vision of Aztlan for all the linguistic, cultural and spiritual border-crossers that Anzalduá addresses in her work. As a metaphorical palimpsest (Cooper Alarcón, 1997), Aztlan will continue to change and be redefined by succeeding generations of Chicano scholars, perhaps never completely erasing its earlier definitions.

Author biography

Dr. Brenda Watts is Assistant Professor of Spanish at Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. Her research interests include Chicana literature, Latin American autobiography, border theory, and the transnational. Her dissertation, Historical Transgressions: The Creation of a Transnational Female Political Subject in Works by Chicana Writers (2000) explores the creation of a transnational female political subject in works by Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Erlinda Gonzales-Berry.

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