

Theory as Interruption: What Inter(re)feres / La Teoría como interrupción: lo que se atraviesa*

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ABSTRACT

Centered on the work in the field of gender studies at the Universidad Autónoma de México, this essay explores the production of knowledge, pedagogical practices and theoretical maneuvers inspired by Anzaldúa's work. In particular, it delves into the construction of pedagogical imperatives (pedagogies of wonder/wander and of interruption) inside the classroom, which travel and expand to be in contact with social urgencies, as Anzaldúa advises. The essay ends with an example of this kind of pedagogical operation through the interruption of a *letrado*, or intellectual, by a *deslenguada*, wild tongue. Anzaldúa "stands in the way" (*se atraviesa*) of Paz, a recognized intellectual and his ideas of identity and knowledge related to nation formation.

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RESUMEN

Centrado en el trabajo en el campo de estudios de género en la Universidad Autónoma de México, este ensayo explora la producción de conocimiento, prácticas pedagógicas y maniobras teóricas inspiradas en el trabajo de Anzaldúa. En particular, profundiza en la construcción de imperativos pedagógicos (pedagogías de asombro / deambulación y de interrupción) dentro del aula, que viajan y se expanden para estar en contacto con las urgencias sociales, como aconseja Anzaldúa. El ensayo termina con un ejemplo de este tipo de operación pedagógica a través de la interrupción de un letrado por una deslenguada. Anzaldúa “se le atraviesa” a Paz, un intelectual reconocido, y a sus ideas de identidad y conocimiento relacionadas con la formación de la nación.

Palabras clave: maniobras teóricas, pedagogías de wonder/wander y de las interrupciones, salón de clase ambulante

1. INTRODUCTION

Centered on the last 15 years of work in the field of gender studies at the Universidad Autónoma de México, this essay explores the production of knowledge, pedagogical practices and theoretical maneuvers inspired by Anzaldúa's work. In particular, it delves into the construction of pedagogical imperatives (pedagogies of wonder/wander and of interruption) inside the classroom, which travel and expand to be in contact with social urgencies, as Anzaldúa advises. In this manner, “Theory as interruption,” crosses over to meet social urgencies as a way to incarnate theoretical thought, by the understanding of the classroom as a space of ambulance and inter(re)ference. The essay ends with an example of this kind of pedagogical operation through the interruption of a *letrado* (intellectual) by a *deslenguada* (wild tongue). Anzaldúa “stands in the way” (se atraviesa) of Paz, a recognized intellectual and his ideas of identity and knowledge related to nation formation.

2. THEORY AS INTERRUPTION: PEDAGOGIES OF WONDER/WANDER

Focusing in the Gender Studies curriculum at the UNAM, Mexico's premier public university's Programa Universitario de Estudios de Genero from 2004 to 2013

and in the School of Education, and in the Humanities from 2013- until today, a group of students, professors, activists and artistis, have been doing significant work related with Chicana/ Latino Studies and particularly with Anzaldúa's critical thinking. As chair of the Gender Studies Programa at UNAM (PUEG 2004-2013), I commissioned translations of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and Chela Sandoval *Methodologies of the Oppressed* into Spanish in 2014, and worked with the graduate studies curriculum in innovative ways inspired by Anzaldúa's critical thinking.¹ Ten years ago, we created and added to the curriculum an option, or emphasis on Gender Studies, Critical Pedagogy and Visual Discourse also inspired by Anzaldúa's writing and discourse. Under a reorganized curriculum, we now teach three graduate seminars annually whose core of inspiration lies in Anzaldúa's narrative and critical thought.

Her pedagogical narrative works by interrupting (suspending) hegemonic ways of knowing and so against the disappearance of bodies of knowledge and student bodies inside the classroom; it makes them present through the articulation of their forms of resisting inside the classroom.

Anzaldúa's work responds to a strategic "resistance to theory", as Paul de Man would name his controversial and strategic pedagogical essay. As stated in this essay, it is by virtue of the resistance, the obstaculation and interruption of hegemonic thinking (Theory), that Anzaldúa produces pedagogies of critical thinking inside a public university, a kind knowledge which resists concepts developed in a vacuum, and stresses for situated knowledges. Her writing fosters theorizing from the body, "embodying" theoretical thinking (experiences, emotions and transactions), that are necessary to understand each other's limits and to build bridges between different fields, subjects, languages and understandings. This pedagogical urgency for the word that bridges the body, drives me directly to a strategic notion developed in *Borderlands*, which enables the emergence of theoretical thinking: the act of interruption (*atravesar*), of intervening academia with the bodies of knowledge and of students that accumulate at its borders. Several questions arise: In which ways does Anzaldúa teach us to think and act critically? What is the relation of Anzaldúa's thought and practice with the actions of suspending and interrupting? What does urgency do to academic language? In which way is it possible that urgency is worked through interruption? What does interruption do to theory? And most importantly how do we teach interruption (*atravesamiento*) as theoretical *movidas* inside the classroom, as ways to activate knowledge and bridge academic thought towards social urgencies? In Anzaldúa's words:

To activate conocimiento- to interrupt- we need the hand-maniobras- The hand is an agent of action. It is not enough to speak and write and talk and communicate. It is not enough to see and recognize and know. We need to act upon what we know, to do something about it. The left hand has always been seen as sinister and strange, associated with the female gender and creativity. But in unison with the right, the left hand can perform great things. (Anzaldúa 2009)

In *Borderlands* Anzaldúa depicts *Los atravesados* (the queer, migrants, Mexicans), the bodies that obstruct-interrupt- the theoretical text, and hegemonic discourses. The ones that push for detours. *¿Cómo lograr que sea el cuerpo del estudiante el que se atraviese?* How do we interrupt academic thinking with the student body?

A borderlands is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eye, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrels, the mulato, 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)

This intervention as interruption performed by Anzaldúa’s theoretical texts is preceded by strategic ambivalence, a sort or errancy of signification. This ambulation produces suspension of final signification, by the postponement of an imminent –stereotypical– knowledge, a displacement, an errancy made into a pedagogy: deferment as method.² This delay and errance in the process of signification may be read as a theoretical maneuver. In a contradictory manner, ambivalence, delay and suspension are the routes to achieve an urgent knowledge be it pedagogical historic or sexual. A detour in expected and demeaning knowledge –a process of revision of vernacular culture– is produced, a detour for reparation.

Edward Said works in his article “Traveling Theory,” with the necessary wandering of concepts to be appropriated as critical thinking. Critical thinking, according to Said, is only possible by a process of interruption of hegemonic concepts, done by the act of traveling, the ambivalence of theory, moving from one place to the other, crossing borders from northern to southern territories, from male to female readers, from racially unmarked to racially marked bodies. Said takes about interruption by the action of deviation of origin and destiny. He asks: “Can we use it differently from what it was created for? Theory can begin as liberating, but if not rappropriated, can become a trap of its own (Said 238). Anzaldúa and Said, two war-zone thinkers of embattled borders, inscribe the possibility of critical thinking as a product of detour and interruption.

Decolonial thinking is crafted mainly through diapsora, by traveling and by staying in different contexts, which allow for diverse and new perspectives. A process of strategic and productive de-familiarization is at stake as a relativization of the social conceptions that preexist in the local context. Said reminds us that critical thought is only possible if it is based on the activation of knowledge, which encompasses necessary detours for the interruption of Academic or hegemonic theory and thinking.

Decolonial pedagogies or *movidas* (Sandoval) inscribe the urgent and displaced possibility for theory (as critical thought), only within the process of interruption as a movement of ambulance, precisely in the movement from dispossession to dispossession: going from a dispossessed body to one with the disposition for the appropriation of knowledge, going from disappearance, to appearance inside the classroom, from wandering from one geocultural or disciplinary border to another, to wonder about academia and its borders. Wandering as an itinerant pedagogy and to some extent the encounter with the unexpected, the wonder of the surprise or the suppressed effective when wandering, and suspending final signification, amounts to the postponement of the arrival at a preconceived destination, or prefigured knowledge.

The kind of knowledge students need is seldom at the tip of their tongues. It needs to wander to its roots and back again to be significant. In Anzaldúa's words "Even our own people, other Spanish speakers nos quieren poner candado en la boca. They could hold us back with their bag of *reglas de la academia*" (Anzaldúa 1989: 76). Anzaldúa breaks with academic rules of language, through pedagogical detours as interruptions. In what follows I intend to give account of the pedagogies of deviation and interruption inspired by Anzaldúa's thought and practice.

3. EMBODYING THEORY THROUGH INTERRUPTION

Anzaldúa's writing, visual and theoretical work is guided by a constant process of interruption: writing is interrupted by autobiography, heterosexuality by queerness, modernity by *El Mundo Zurdo*, word by image, English by Spanish, and Spanish by *la deslengua*; there is no hegemonic system that remains uninvolved, uninterrupted. Herein lies the importance of critical thought. Thus, we face a textuality which is product of crossings, a writing of paradox (urgency and interruption) and oxymoron (an urgent postponement). Writing from suspense and postponement means doing theory, but incarnate theory as an effect of wondering from hegemonic bodies of knowledge to the ones accumulated at the border.

Inside the classroom, and within this detours, students may be capable of thinking by interrupting what they read, authorized to cross along theoretical

paradigms, which could otherwise be read without interruption, without criticism, without inscribing borders. What does it mean to train students capable of throwing their bodies in *-atravesarlos-* of “getting them in the way” of what they read? Put the body along the text. What does it mean to stand across *-in the way-* of theoretical texts? How do students “stick their tongues out”? Is it possible to preserve “wild tongues” in Academia?³ In Anzaldúa’s own words

Our strategy for survival and resistance brings together three different abilities: communicating, knowing, and doing, which I represent in my hieroglyphic of a left hand on whose palm are pictures a pair of eyes, a mouth with a tongue hanging out and the riting tip of a pen at the tip of her tongue. Los ojos represent seeing and knowing which can lead to understanding o conocimiento. It means getting to know each other and, as mestizas form many cultures, seeing from multiple points of view...La lengua is a symbol for speech, for breaking silence by talking, communicating and writing. The split forked tongue of the serpent is my signal for communicating bilingually. (Anzaldúa 2009)

The act of interrupting theoretical texts makes student use the text and critical models they recruit, and not the other way around. In this way, Anzaldúa’s *pensamiento atravesado/ pensamiento que interrumpe*, becomes a model for pedagogies of interruption; it encourages not only crossing borders, but “sticking the tongue out” interrupting the theoretical texts that come from the outside, and which may *-if not completely interrupted-* block questions that come from within the local student’s knowledge about their own social concerns, doubts, personal, and current fears and anxieties (which at some point need to be differed too).

Anzaldúa’s narrative represents action and activation but also deferment, suspense, diffraction of signification. The first byproduct of our students’ approach to complex theoretical texts is interrupting. From this operation and these mechanics, drawn from an Anzaldúan pedagogy, emerges the practice of theorizing as an act of differing hegemonic signification and suspending the cognitive process.⁴ In what follows I give an example of the operation of interruption through the intervention/interruption of Gloria Anzaldúa in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* of Octavio Paz.

4. DETOUR AND INTERRUPTION. *EL LETRADO Y LA DESLENGUADA*. OCTAVIO PAZ AND GLORIA ANZALDÚA

Borderlands invites us to redefine the territorios from which we speak and make sense of what defines us at the borders of national and identity discourses. One of the most recognized texts that talk about nation formation and identity construction

in the first half of the 20th century is *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. The acclaimed essay begins with a chapter on the enigmatic figure, *el Pachuco*, as a sort of clown, extreme and almost incomprehensible. Anzaldúa provides the conceptual means to interrupt some trends of thoughts delineated in this foundational text.

Anzaldúa's discourse allows for exercising the "right to interrupt", the urgency of "getting in the way" *de atravesarnos a un letrado* (urgency to interrupt an intellectual); to locate Gloria in the way of Octavio, interrupting one of the foundational texts that debates national and Mexican identity, his famous book: *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Anzaldúa's work is not only essential in the understanding of the politics of intersectionality, but also helps us reread the foundational narratives which have shaped our identity and understand ourselves at the borders of nation and national discourse, that is as modern subjects *crossed* by various contradictions.⁵ She occupies a prominent position today in debates around citizenship, racism, activism, identity, and social justice. Paz, in his time, revolutionized the way in which Mexico and Mexicans conceived themselves and understood themselves as modern subjects. Nowadays, in times of deep uncertainty in Mexico, Anzaldúa opens the possibility for a detour: a new quality of thinking about Mexican identity from the perspective of her struggles not only for equality and citizenship, but at the contours of a profound wound due to violence and organized crime. A way to understand ourselves in the fringes of national borders as open wounds, as she states at the beginning of *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

La frontera entre México y Estados Unidos es una herida abierta en donde el tercer mundo raspa contra el primero y sangra. Y antes de formarse una costra, vuelve la hemorragia, la sangrevida de dos mundos fusionándose para formar un tercer país, una cultura fronteriza. (Anzaldúa 1987: 33)

More than fifty years ago, Octavio Paz, was looking at Mexico from Berkeley, California, and wondering about its labyrinths; he wanted to debunk the idea, championed by Samuel Ramos (1897-1959) in *El Perfil del Hombre y la Cultura en México*, regarding Mexican's structural feelings of inferiority. No, we are not inferior, says Paz, what we are is simply alone. It is solitude, rather than inferiority as suggested by Ramos, which makes us modern. Paz works from the notion of solitude as both the foundational emotion for Mexican identity, and for a universal notion of being modern, as the path that allows us to become a modern society. In what he calls "Dialéctica de la Soledad," we read: "La Revolución nos permitió ser conscientes de nuestra soledad y de nuestra voluntad de conocimiento de nosotros mismos" (Paz 160).

Anzaldúa's *Borderland*, may be read as a text that responds by interrupting that what makes us belong to the category of "modern," put into question precisely by the persistent marginality produced at its borders, is the capability of translating such solitude into action, collective or singular, but with the inclusion of the ones excluded: women, others and minorities. Anzaldúa strives for a diverse reflection on identity by the negotiation of difference and administration of solitude, no longer in solitude. Her *Mundo Zurdo* would be a project of maneuvering solitude and difference. In her words:

Creo que al cambiarnos cambiamos al mundo....Somos los grupos raros, la gente que no pertenece a ningun sitio, ni al mundo dominante, ni completamente a nuestra propia cultura.....pero estas afinidades distintas no se oponen al mundo zurdo, yo con mis propias afinidades y mi gente con las suyas podemos vivir juntas y transformer el planeta. (Anzaldúa 2015: 168)

Paz, particularly in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, and Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, share a common goal from very dissimilar bodies and positions: to explain Mexican identity, through the notion of the "wound" and, from there, to draw a roadmap for identity (border identity and a national one), Anzaldúa as liminal, Paz as limiting.

What we are as Mexicans –according to Paz– starts to be outlined in the first chapter of *Labyrinth*, "El Pachuco y otros extremos," with an analysis of Mexican identity starting from the definition of the *Pachuco*, this "pelado" y "deslenguado" who has lost everything: language, memory, and identity.

El pachuco ha perdido toda su herencia: lengua, religión, costumbres, creencias. Sólo le queda un cuerpo y un alma a la intemperie, inerte ante todas las miradas. Su disfraz lo protege y, al mismo tiempo, lo destaca y aísla: lo oculta y lo exhibe. (Paz 3)

Paz goes on with his critical perspective on Mexican identity with the analysis of *La Malinche*, another enigma, an abysmal character. With her example, we understand that Mexicans, as Paz states, come from two brutal acts: betrayal (Pachuco) and rape (Malinche).

¿Quién es la Chingada? Ante todo, es la Madre. No una Madre de carne y hueso, sino una figura mítica. La Chingada es una de las representaciones mexicanas de la Maternidad, como la Llorona o la "sufrida madre mexicana"... La chingada, la hembra, la pasividad, pura, inerte ante el exterior. La relación entre ambos es violenta, determinada por el poder cínico del primero y la impotencia de la otra (Paz 31-32).

I understand Anzaldúa's work as a counterpoint, a counter-balance, a counter narrative, an interruption to *The Labyrinth of Solitude* and its representation of the figures of *el Pachuco* and *la Malinche*, as the bearers of loss and shame. Anzaldúa opens *Borderlands* with a narrative, which is reminiscent of the *el Pachuco*, with an image of the Mexican living on *the other side*, in the US. "El Pachuco does not affirm anything at all, he negates all around himself" (3); Octavio Paz understands him as an enigma:

Pero los "pachucos" no reivindican su raza ni la nacionalidad de sus antepasados. A pesar de que su actitud revela una obstinada y casi fanática voluntad de ser, esa voluntad no afirma nada concreto sino la decisión -ambigua, como se verá- de no ser como los otros que los rodean. El "pachuco" no quiere volver a su origen mexicano; tampoco -al menos en apariencia- desea fundirse a la vida norteamericana. Todo en él es impulso que se niega a sí mismo, un nudo de contradicciones, enigma. (Paz 3)

He also rereads *La Malinche* or *La Chingada* the Mother of Mexicans, an enigma and an equation for betrayal. Both *El Pachuco* and *La Malinche*, according to Paz, are read as enigmatic, as subjects of betrayal and loss. Anzaldúa proposes a rereading of these figures in her work, particularly in *Borderlands*.

Descarado (faceless) and deslenguada (shameless) both *el Pachuco* and *la Malinche* frame his argument. *El Pachuco* "has lost everything" beginning with his language, el Español; *La Malinche* represents mutism, la *chingada*, the wounded one, she has nothing to say. They both display -in his reading- an outmost precariousness to deal with the devices and signs of modernity (the wound, the word, and the national body). Thus, Paz places the problem of identity on the representation of loss, disenfranchisement and a vacuum: the untongued (*el Pachuco*) and the wounded/raped (*La Malinche*). Both embody the loss of identity rooted in language (the loss of the Spanish language for migrants) and in the body, la "chingada" represents the loss of the body and virginity for women. Violence and betrayal constitute then the center of the maze, the *Labyrinth*, the center of Mexican identity.

Anzaldúa offers in *Borderlands* a counterpoint to this form of understanding national identity, precisely from its "discards": *el Pelado* and *la Chingada*: *El Pachuco* y *La Malinche*. She makes both *la Malinche* and *el Pachuco* "speak" from the body and their wound, a territory for signification called *The New Mestiza*. *Borderlands* interrupts our identities from the figures of *el Pachuco* and *la Malinche*; they both become the voice for subjects on the border, for migrants and minorities, queers, *deslenguados*: the voices that come from the borders. Neither *pelados* nor

traitors: *mestizo* subjects, *crossed*, bordered. *La Malinche* and *el Pachuco* sketch the New Mestiza in *Borderlands*, the identity, the territory that speaks in tongues and who establishes a new land with a broken language and a broken body, “crossed” by racial, class and gender inequalities, where differences grid, but where they also have a place.

The use of the adjective *crossed* “*atravesados*” to define the inhabitants of border zones, which Anzaldúa employs in *Borderlands*, takes us back to their character as inadequate and abnormal, queer, as bodies that stand in between and obstruct. She rewrites Paz’s *Pachucos* –current Chicanos and queer (crossers)–, and their culture in motion, not as a set of languages and subjects which have lost their meaning and forgotten their origin, but as living attitudes, full of significances that “cross”, interrupt, cut or “stand in the way” of the hegemonic American culture. Chicano culture forces the redefinition of road maps for identity, because it intervenes, obstaculizes an exclusive and voracious modernity. With their forms of being and living –strange and forbidden– the “crossers” get in the way and interrupt American hegemonic culture.

Since the 1970s, several borderland intellectuals and artists have worked intensely with the figure of La Malinche from a different symbolic place and, certainly, in projects rather different from those derived from Paz’s work. I am talking about the work of Chicana writers, visual artists and intellectuals who, from these critical gestures, defy the interpretations of “*la chingada*” and “*la vende patrias*” (the one who sold us out), of the woman seen as passive and as a traitor, and place her beyond that, in the spheres of the aesthetic and the political.⁶

5. CONCLUSION

In the intimacy of the classroom, I have witnessed what reading Anzaldúa’s writing stirs in our students, the ones from public universities in Mexico City and other places in the country, who take the bus –*combi*– or metro for four or five hours each day, who leave class early in order to get to work and then go home to cook, clean, and look after their children, their elders or their sick relatives, who live amid domestic and workplace violence.

Borderlands supports the power to enunciate theoretically, but not just from Cixous, Irigaray or Paz, but from the body of a *deslenguada*, with no right to interrupt, a Chicano/Mexican who defines herself as a descendant of a laborer and a peasant, who was sexually unabiding, and who owned the power granted by writing from these territories. Anzaldúa’s discourse reminds us not only of de Man or Said but of the

Zapatista Commander Esther and her discursive and visual power; it also reminds us of Audre Lorde's and Angela Davis' writings and struggles, and their theoretical work linked to their ways of interrupting in order to foster radical political actions. Actions like the ones we need to construct, to interrupt the attacks against Mexicans and groups of Mexican descent and Chicanxs under the Trump administration. "Theory as interruption, "fosters pedagogies that support use of theory by "putting the body in the way" of discourses which may invisibilice and silence students who live at the border of nation and academia and inside our classrooms.

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NOTES

¹ See Anzaldúa, G. *Borderlands. La Frontera. La Nueva Mestiza*. México: PUEG/UNAM, 2014. Print and Sandoval, Ch. *Metodología del Oprimido*, México: PUEG/UNAM, 2014. Print.

² There are several pedagogical projects that work with the notion of errance in teaching (ambulant or expanded classroom). See Walter Omar Kohen: *The Inventive Schoolmaster*.

³ I am alluding to the section “How to tame a wild tongue” from *Boderlands*, where Anzaldúa uses her uncontrolled tongue, to talk about linguistic terrorism, that is, a different way of punishing Spanish speakers during her childhood in Texas.

⁴ See Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.”

⁵ I owe this comparison to Norma Alarcón, the foremost critic of Gloria Anzaldúa’s work and of Chicana academic work. See Norma Alarcón (1999) “Chicana Feminism: In Tracks of “The” Native Women” (1990) and “The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called my Back and Anglo-American Feminism” (1990).

⁶ Notably, Norma Alarcón, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and visual artists Alma López, Yolanda López, Lourdes Portillo, among many others.