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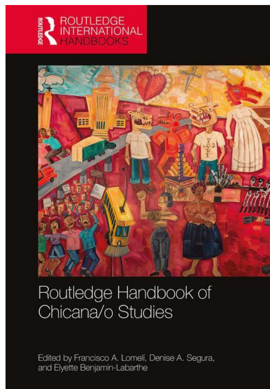

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The embodied epistemology of Chicana/o mestizaje

Rafael Pérez-Torres

Mestizaje stands as a privileged category in Chicana/o critical discourse. At one level, the term simply represents the mixture of two races. In a Chicana/o context, the word evokes a bloody history of Spanish imperial reach into a world once home to millions of Indigenous inhabitants. It recalls, too, long-standing and long-reaching U.S. governmental intervention in the politics and policies of Mexico. A history of invasion, repression, and exploitation freights the mixture of European and Indigenous races and practices in what we now call the Americas.[1] Chicana/o mestizaje as a condition embodies the conflicted historical legacy of contact and conquest; and, so, at a visceral level it seems to provide a racialized identity. This embodiment rests on the fairy dust of representation, of course, as both history and the body's position in it are constructed socially through language. So Chicana/o mestizaje only *seems* to reside as some ontological condition. Its repeated deployment in artistic, literary, theoretical, and critical realms underscores the power and contingency of language as a tool of self-reflexivity. And, at the same time, the affect this power takes is real and often painful. For a vast array of reasons, many brown bodies in the United States by word and deed are devalued, denigrated, and discarded, often into carceral warehouses where they are disavowed precisely because they are brown bodies.

The critical recognition of racial mixture by Chicanas/os represents an affirming embrace of brown bodies. It asserts that brown bodies in the United States possess value and worth. Brown Power claimed, as did the Black and Red Power movements in the 1960s and 1970s, the right to self-determination. In politics, commerce, and cultural, aesthetic, and literary production, a Chicano[2] nationalism grew based on processes of self-identification aligned with decolonial and anticolonial struggles in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Moreover, the affiliation with revolutionary struggles abroad deepened a commitment to revolutionary movements at home, such as the American Indian and Black Panther movements. Asserting a mestizo or mestiza (mixed racial) identity represents a recognition of Indigenous ancestry – if not always through direct political engagement, then in an ideologically resistant way – as a conscious decolonial strategy. As a statement of racial and political identification, mestizaje stakes a claim in new configurations of identity that recognize Indigenous ancestry as significant to a decolonizing process of self-recognition. But self-recognition is not the same thing as identity. The slippage between recognition and identification represents a site of discursive rupture. A romanticized

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dream of Chicana/o ancestry buckles and breaks when called to serve as a guarantor of Indigenous identity.

As such, in Chicana/o discourse, mestizaje indexes multiple forms of loss. Octavio Paz famously made much of Mexico as the bastard child of European adventurism and Indigenous fatalism. The essays in his 1950 book, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, ruminate on a nation whose sense of racial illegitimacy underpins its ostensibly melancholic national character. Race mixture in a Chicana/o setting signifies in quite a different manner. As with Paz's characterization, mestizaje represents, in Chicana/o thought, the manifestation of an irreparable loss: connection to Indigenous life. This loss begins with and because of modernity, with all its conflicts, injustices, and deep, irreconcilable contradictions. Grounded in the sexual violence of multiple brutal invasions and a tightly controlled colonization of Indigenous and mixed-race populations by Spain, Chicana/o mestizaje affirms the generative and conflicting confluence of many selves as a result of the horrors of conquest and colonization. A fragmentary, contradictory, self-aware subjectivity arises to speak against learned self-hatred – ideological control as a legacy of colonialism – as well as against racial and sexual violence – repressive technologies of colonial terror. While linked to loss, Chicana/o mestizaje serves in the present to interrogate and contest racially inflected notions of national identification and affiliation in the United States.

Central to the Spanish colonial system, forms of ideological control mediated through the cultural legacies that have generated Chicana/o subjectivities. Successive flows of Mexican immigration have forged and fed Chicana/o communities and their powerful sense of cultural becoming. Whether due to the push of economic, political, or social instability, or the pull of plentiful low-wage jobs in crop picking, meat processing, and domestic caretaking, those Mexican nationals most impelled to find employment in the United States are those most compellingly vulnerable. Poor, often besieged communities from which national/cultural hybrid immigrants come result from the colonial *encomienda* (indentured labor) system and the later *hacienda* (Spanish land grant) system that relegated the poor to little more than unpaid servants on great estates. These communities, following the Revolution of 1910–1920, were objects of national educational programs meant to propagate a sense of Mexican nationalist cohesion, though inflected by colonial, paternalistic, and corporatist ideologies. The mixed-race person became synonymous with modernity and progress; and Indigenous people, although visible, were understood as divorced from the modern national project (Carroll 2013, p. 81). The mixed-race individual as the ideal citizen-subject in a Mexican context serves at once to recognize and erase racial difference. The mestizo represents the modern man (the gender referent is deliberate) moving Mexico into its triumphalist future: Indigenous identity is understood as part of a glorious but mystic Aztec past; African and Asian identities are usually erased entirely from Mexican national identity.

In the United States, the development of mestizaje registers very differently. On one level its evocation by Chicana/o artists, critics, and writers serves to challenge a binary approach to race, the sort that has informed such notions as the one-drop rule of racial contamination and strictly enforced demarcations between Black and white races in the United States. By proclaiming their mixed-racial identity, Chicana/o activists and artists valorize their Indigenous ancestry and stake a claim to being native to (if not Native in) the Americas. Taken up most notably and influentially by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), the term signals the multiply embodied aspects of self as Chicana/o subjectivity. Anzaldúa's important contributions underscore her voice and perspective as a working-class, dyke, Chicana writer (all titles she insistently and proudly claimed for herself). The power of her writing resides in the clarity of her written voice that, because of her repressed experiences growing up in a colonized space, embraced her ambiguously gendered, sexualized, racialized identities. Anzaldúa's *new* consciousness offers an insight into how the self is composed in multiple ways.

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Though Anzaldúa's writings (in conjunction with Cherríe Moraga, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and many other U.S. women of color) usher in new paradigms of identity as constructed multiply, this representation is not unique. Mestizaje as a recognition of multiple, sometimes contradictory points of identification is a familiar formulation in Chicana/o cultural and critical discourse. The quintessential poem of the Chicano movement, *Yo soy Joaquín/I Am Joaquín* by the Colorado activist and organizer Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, offers an articulation of Chicano subjectivity composed from the strands of numerous, often conflicting historical identities.

Written in 1967 and printed as a mimeo leaflet, a public expression of defiance, and (though not expressed as such) the declamation of a new historical subjectivity, the poem embraces multiplicity, however contradictorily constructed. Meant originally as a tool to help catalyze direct political action, it became one of the first articulations of a self-consciously politicized Chicano self. Attempting to fortify an image of racial-ethnic identity through political action, the poem offers a startling portrayal: an empowered voice of Chicano self-formation, a politically engaged subjectivity speaking of the many injustices and imbalances wrought by modernity and forged from a long and grinding colonial history.

"I am Joaquín":[3] the poem opens with a simple phrase of self-identification. This simple statement gives way to a meditation on the conditions of loss and confusion that Joaquín, as an individual of Mexican cultural identity working in the technologized world of U.S. modernization, experiences as an alienated postmodern laborer. In the face of the exploitation and denigration of the current age, the poetic voice (sometimes construed individually, sometimes collectively) considers the contradictions of the Mexican national past in order to generate significance for a conflicted present. As it calls up Mexican historical figures, the voice of a new Chicano subject names itself in points of contact with Indigenous and revolutionary identities: "I am Cuauhtémoc" (Gonzales 1972, p. 16); "I was part in blood and spirit/ of that/ courageous village priest/ Hidalgo" (Ibid., p. 25); "I fought and died/ for/ Don Benito Juárez" (Ibid., p. 30); "I rode with Pancho Villa"; "I am Emiliano Zapata" (Ibid., p. 34). Paradoxically, Joaquín presents himself as the rich *hacendado*, the conquering Spaniard, the dictatorial tyrant Porfirio Díaz, the victimized Aztec, and the impoverished campesino all at once. The many contradictory positions of identity that the narrative of Mexican nationalist history both recognizes and seeks to reconcile shatters amid the tension and fragmentation evoked through Gonzales's poem.

The subjectivity the poetic voice asserts enfolds the political, social, cultural, and racial contradictions the Spanish colonial system generated for its variegated subjects. The poem affirms a version of Mexican history imbricated in the nationalizing ideologies of a post-revolutionary Mexican political bureaucracy – discussed shortly as regards José Vasconcelos, the post-revolutionary Mexican educator responsible for the articulation of Mexicans as generating a new, transcendent "cosmic" race. However, the poem transforms the significance of the Mexican national narrative as it shifts to a different national context. In *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos* (1982), Juan Bruce-Novoa carefully charts how Gonzales's poem seeks to mark out a new definition for Chicano identity. The poem helped make manifest a central idea: "the paradigmatic process of definition is mestizaje, or miscegenation, achieved through the spilling of blood. One must be willing to spill blood – a ritual hierophany according to the poem – for the good of the people" (Bruce-Novoa 1982, p. 49). Blood as a ritual manifestation of the sacred becomes a metonym for racial mixture, a biologized and ritualized evocation of a new identity. This identity links the blood that runs from the "back of Indian slavery" (Gonzales 1972, 54) under Spanish subjugation, to the U.S. veterans of Mexican descent who fought and died at significant military conflicts in U.S. national mythology: the beaches of Normandy, the hills of Korea, the villages of Vietnam. The blood spilled here both mixes with and flows against rigid nationalist discourses in order to generate a newly formulated Chicano mestizaje. The imagery

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of Gonzales's poem contests and rejects cohesive U.S. and Mexican nationalist notions of identity and affirms – however imprecisely and passionately through masculinist terms – the conception that Chicano subjectivity arises from a highly compromised social and political mixture.

The centrality of mestizaje to contemporary Chicana/o critical thought is evident in the titles of a number of scholarly monographs produced in first decade of this millennium: *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (2001) by Karen Mary Dávalos addresses representations of Mexican American subjectivity in museum spaces; *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture* (2006) by Rafael Pérez-Torres engages the term as a signifier in Chicano cultural discourse; *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance* (2006) by Alicia Arrizón looks at transculturation in racialized visual and performance art; *Mestizaje: Remapping Race, Culture, and Faith in Latina/o Catholicism* (2009) by Néstor Medina examines the syncretic manifestations of Latino religions; *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative* (2011) by Theresa Delgadillo addresses spirituality as a gendered expression of Chicana consciousness; and *The Chican@ Hip Hop Nation: Politics of a New Millennial Mestizaje* (2013) by Pancho McFarland considers how contemporary musical formations represent distinct melded globalized identities. All these studies rely to some degree on a model of mestizaje that foregrounds creative inclusiveness, but one grounded in the legacies of inequality that result from a long and often brutish history of race mixture in the Americas.

So where does mestizaje come from? In April 1519, Hernán Cortés and several hundred men made landfall in Veracruz along the eastern seaboard of Mexico as part of an expedition commissioned by Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar, royally appointed Spanish governor of Cuba. By August 1521, the great capital of the Aztec Empire, Tenochtitlan, fell to a force of Spanish troops and tribal armies allied against the Aztecs. The term *mestizo* began to appear a generation later in the late 1530s (Katzew 2004, p. 40). Used to describe the offspring that resulted from Spanish men in sexual congress with Indian women, the word signaled illicit (probably forced) sexual intercourse. The category of the mestizo and mestiza served to disrupt the neat racial/social separation of Spanish from Indian. Due to the social instability that this racial amalgamation posed, the rights of mestizos were nearly as heavily curtailed as those of Indians.

Spanish overlords considered mestizos – from among the Indian, Africans both free and slave, and mulatto people populating New Spain in the sixteenth century – the best of the worst. So this in part has generated the association of mestizos as racial/ethnic traitors to Indigenous as well as African- and Asian-descended communities in the Americas.

Still, the presence of a growing mass of mixed race groups – mestizos and the multiple variations of Indian, Spanish, African mix indexed under the *casta* system – posed a threat to the stability of colonial Spanish social order. By the 1650s, this social anxiety had generated a hierarchically arranged racial schema called the *sistema de castas*. Born from a medieval concept of the natural hierarchy of man, the *casta* system forged a legal complex of socio-racial ranking. These served to codify distinctions and meld race to social classification. Pure-blooded peninsular Spaniards occupied positions of highest social value, while the conquered Indian (except for the deposed nobility) were meant to occupy the lowest status above slaves; free Blacks and mixed-race people stood somewhere between (Chance & Taylor 1977, p. 460). Ideologized socio-racial designations often belied the fact that, under colonial control, Indians experienced the greatest material and social deprivations among all racialized classes (Katzew 2004, p. 39). Nevertheless, despite (or perhaps because of) the complex racial categorization of mixed-race populations, strictly monitored racial borders led ultimately to some racial fluidity when it came to social citizenship.

The complex racial and interracial dynamics of the *casta* system, along with a mercantile economic class system that came to be developed by the late colonial period in Mexico, at

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once provided social dynamism and reinforced social stratification. By the time significant social restructuring took place after the Mexican Revolution, the word *mestizo* represented a social as well as a racial identification. Throughout Latin America, these populations have enjoyed greater access to social and economic advancements over members of Black and Indigenous communities. Mestizos became subjects viewed, derisively or affirmatively, as striving for greater social mobility and consequently identifying with white Europeanized society. In this vein, mestizaje has been used to represent Latin American society as a racial democracy, a benign multicultural melting pot of acculturation, passively incorporating the differences that comprise the rich stew of Latin American cultural identities (Polar 1998, p. 7). Mestizaje (a term that draws together biology and culture) weighs heavily in the formulation of the modern Latin American nation-state. Its service has been meant to acculturate newly formed citizen-subjects into productive members of developing nation-states.

José Vasconcelos, in his capacity as Mexico's secretary of public education (1920–1924) after the Mexican Revolution, sought to transform the Mexican nation by engendering unity through a cultural missionary program spread across rural schools. Vasconcelos's attempt at national cohesion rested on an ideological construct by which Indians were to be acculturated and learn to meet the needs of a modern Mexican nation-state. In 1925 he published his tome *La raza cósmica: misión de la raza iberoamericana* (*The Cosmic Race: Mission of the Ibero-American Race*), reconceptualizing race mixture as providential, progressive, and beneficial for Mexico (2004 Miller, p. 28). The effect in Mexico has been to situate the mestizo as an agent in history while leaving the Indian as a point of tragic origin.

While meant to enable a nascent Mexican national unity, Vasconcelos's missionizing project excluded Indigenous and African populations from nationalist self-identification. The naturalization of mixed European and Indian stock as the racial condition of the Mexican people has made other collective racial identities mostly illegible (and, when legible, illegitimate). For this reason mestizaje has been described an "all-inclusive ideology of exclusion" (Stutzman 1981, p. 45).[4]

Unmoored from the ideological constraints of Latin American nation-building, it can in the United States provide a sharp, politically motivated, sociocultural critique. Though carrying considerable ideological weight, in a Chicana/o cultural context it stands as a critical and resistant category. Instead of acculturation, it engages in a creative transculturation, a term used by Cuban critic Fernando Ortiz to name the process by which a subjugated group simultaneously incorporates and transforms the culture of the dominant (1947). The colonial process, with its dynamic interplay of subjection, subjugation, and domination, does not imply a simple top-down process of control and erasure. It relies on multiple though unequal assertions of agency in the development of thought, belief, and action. Chicana/o mestizaje as a type of transculturation deploys the discourse of Latin American race mixture in order to assert an affirming pride in a racialized ethnic identity. Beyond affirming an empowered racial self, it calls into question the logic of U.S. racial categorization. As it undoes a model of inclusion and exclusion based on a binary logic of U.S. racial categorization, it breaks down other binary divisions in terms of sexuality and gender. The significance of mixed-race bodies becomes their capacity to muddle notions of identity based on purity.

In claiming a mixed-race condition, Chicana/o culture undertakes a project of decentralization. Meaning, undone in order to forge new understandings based on the doubleness implicit in race-mixing, reaches for a third state or condition just as the conjunction of European and Indigenous results in a mestiza/o state. As a critical optic and a cultural practice, it helps enact the idea of multiple subjectivities. Moreover, it signals the embodiedness of history. As such, it opens a world of possibilities for forging new relational identities. Through its deployment in

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Chicana/o cultural production, mestizaje presents the body as a text, a site of ideological contestation. The mixed-race body, interpreted through cultural and political practice, affirms alternate and resistant positions against repressive acts. Still, the unsettled racial nature of Chicana/o subjectivity in U.S. nationhood pressures and distorts processes of identification through clearly delineated social scripts.

The body provides a material textual connection to a colonial history of racial hierarchy whose configurations of power in turn constrain and guide the body. This is the reason Norma Alarcón insists, in among other essays, "Traddutora, Traditora: a paradigmatic figure of Chicana feminism" (1989) that Chicana subjectivity cannot be understood as a classed and ethnicized body separate from a gendered, sexualized, and racialized one. The body as the nexus of various forces serves as a site of tenuous, complex, and conflicted change. It becomes more than a powerful metaphor signaling cultural hybridity. It roots cultural production and change in the physical memory of injustice and inhuman exploitation, of desire and transforming love. It becomes a critical mestizaje (Pérez-Torres 2006, pp. 3–50).

A critical perspective on racial mixture enables insight into the relationship between bodies and ideology, between nature and culture. As ideological constructs of subjectivity fail to fully name the disjuncture Chicana/o subjects experience, they undergo a dislocation of identity (or disidentification as José Muñoz in *Disidentifications* [1999] conceptualizes it). A disjuncture or rupture in ideology occurs through the dislocation of mestiza/o bodies in the crosscurrents of globalized American society and its cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny (Muñoz 1999, p. 5). Mestizaje evoked in Chicana/o discourse helps name a critical awareness produced by dislocation. This awareness reveals that the categories of white, heterosexual, and male serve as realms of privilege.

Awareness does not, however, absolve Chicano critical discourse of its unresolved desires. As has already been observed, self-recognition is not the same thing as identity, and the slippage between a recognition of Indigenous ancestry and an assertion of Indian identity marks a dislocation between Chicana/o and Indigenous understandings of subjectivity. Formations of self-identification that disempower, erase, or misrepresent Indigenous peoples (alive, here, now) replicate colonial practices. The damage, violence, and erasure that mestiza/o subjectivities and ideology have and can yet inflict on Indigenous people cannot be denied. Broad or blind claims to Indigenous identity by Chicanas/os based on unexamined notions of racial ancestry affront Indigenous people. This is not to say that people who recognize a Chicana/o identity cannot as well recognize a lived Indigenous identity. The two, however, are not of necessity coterminous.

As a discourse deeply imbedded in the hemispheric history of Spanish colonization, mestizaje generates complexities that add significance to its deployment in Chicana/o culture. The opportunity for new and timely bridges across multiple ethnic, racial, cultural groups to engage in constructive and necessary talks in an increasingly diverse national population seems more pressing than ever. The push towards creative responses to oppression resonates with how the term has sought to articulate new racial imaginings that transcend rigid categorization. Its historical dimensionality enables a critical return to the violence and triumphs of the past that have set us on the course to the present. In this spirit, it is helpful to recall the groups of Chicana/o and Native American activists who since the 1960s often have worked together in a common cause. These coalitions arose as a result of Chicanas/os recognizing a shared though asymmetrical – and often violently unjust – colonial history with American Indians and other Indigenous groups across the hemisphere.

While indigeneity has haunted notions of Chicano mestizaje, one area of transformative critical/theoretical work it has yet to engage lies precisely in its unsettled relationship to Indigenous peoples. A potential point of contact centers on differently understood and unequally positioned

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histories of colonized violence. The damage yet inflicted by colonization, though hardly symmetrical, is central to both Chicana/o and Indigenous peoples and communities. Moreover, understanding Chicana/o (not Mexican) mestizaje as a subnational racial category in opposition to settler-colonial legacies of racialized violence underscores shared political investments. Finally, its critical use in a Chicana/o cultural context foregrounds a recognition of the repeatedly embodied outrages and injustices inflecting and deforming both mestiza/o and Indigenous processes of self-identification: the imperializing role of Spanish colonial rule, oppression of an extended Mexican dictatorship following the colonial period, exploitation under decades of oligarchical control, and now the underfunding of sustainable living as the result of imposed neoliberal policies. Indigenous communities have for centuries endured devastation, denial, and disavowal.

A Chicano reclamation of Indigenous ancestry need not be the occasion for more disavowal. Yet critics have noted this propensity in Gloria Anzaldúa's own articulation of a new mestiza consciousness. A special edition of *Studies in American Indian Literatures* in 2003/2004 seeks to address the gulf that, in the words of the volume's editors, "exists between American Indian peoples and we who identify as Chicana/os, though inherent in the identification of Chicano is the assertion of an Indian identity, one made problematic by the simultaneous acknowledgement of our Spanish, African, etc., heritages, our *mestizaje*" (Anzaldúa, Ortiz, Avila & Pérez 2003, p. 7). The configuration of Chicana/o identification articulated here is relevant: an "assertion of an Indian identity" made problematic by the simultaneous "acknowledgement of. . . *mestizaje*." The semantics of the sentence reveals the necessity to assert, to will, to insist upon an Indian identity as a component of Chicana/o identity. By contrast, racial mixture as a lived experience needs be, in the words of the editors, subject only to "acknowledgement." The status of the Indian in Aztlán, as Josefina Saldaña-Portillo configures it, remains in this articulation profoundly unsettled (2001).

Because she is such a central figure in placing mestizo/a identity at the heart of Chicana/o discourse, Gloria Anzaldúa's contribution to the journal's special edition is significant. In an email interview published for the edition – apparently the last before her death in May 2004 – Anzaldúa clarifies that she does not call herself an Indian ("an india") but that she does "claim an indigenous ancestry, one of mestizaje" (Anzaldúa et al. 2003. P. 7).[5] The interview becomes revelatory as she discusses her recognition of "la india in me" (Ibid. p. 7) based on how her family racially categorized her body and her behavior as Indian. It is her observational and imaginative skills, however, that generate her deep sense of connection to the india. Grasping images taken from the natural world she states:

> I learned that these images had power, these images allowed me an awareness of something greater, an awareness of the interconnectedness of people and nature and all things, an awareness that people were part of nature and not separate from it. I knew then that the india in me ran deep.
>
> *(Ibid. p. 7)*

In these words Anzaldúa evokes in her imagined relationship to the india an overly familiar trope: the Indian as one with natural world. Further on, she explains that her writing, "is my way of connecting to the tribe, to my indigenous roots. Creative work feeds my soul, gives me spiritual satisfaction" (Ibid. p. 7). The invocation of tribal affiliation in order to articulate strategically constructed social alliances reflects a problematic appropriation in Anzaldúa's thought. Certainly acknowledging the "india within" is a step towards a decolonizing consciousness. But acting in concert with Indigenous activists is just as important in making that decolonized consciousness present in the material world. This involves not just recognizing "the Indian within" so much as recognizing the Indian who yet exists in a shared social and historical now.

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As a result of the recognition of the internal "india," Anzaldúa explains, the conscious mestiza undergoes a disruption of identity, a disruption she cherishes for its creative power. Thus Anzaldúa famously appropriates Aztec religious iconography to signal and symbolize processes of creative rupture and foreground transculturation as a strategy deployed by Chicana/o artists, writers, critics, musicians, and activists. The appropriation represents a rhetorical move meant to mirror the valorization of Aztec culture in dominant visions of Chicano and Mexican nationalisms. Assertively masculine nationalist scripts served, as Anzaldúa and other Chicana writers make clear, to silence women's voices in the formation of Mexican and Chicana identities. Anzaldúa evokes such female Aztec deities as Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui to generate a strategic counter-discourse contesting male-identified notions of Chicana/o identity.

The resurrection of Aztec religious iconography acts to reclaim spirituality in the face of ceaseless modern technological advancement. Because she identifies the syncretic transformation of Coatlalopeuh – the Aztec creator goddess evocative of sexuality and power – with the desexed Virgen de Guadalupe, Anzaldúa invokes the goddess in order to posit an image of rupture and change. She locates the roots of Guadalupe's iconic power in a figure associated with a powerful sexuality, upending a placid image of the virginal mother. Guadalupe becomes for Anzaldúa:

> The single most potent religious, political, and cultural image of the Chicano/Mexicano. She . . . is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered . . . the symbol of the *mestizo* true to his or her Indian values.
>
> *(Anzaldúa 2012, p. 52)*

Anzaldúa creates out of Guadalupe an image of creative transformation and an index of the transformative qualities of mestizaje. The passage reveals a proclivity to think in dualities and how Anzaldúa's schema erases African peoples not just from "the two races in our psyche" but from history itself.

These limitations cannot be dismissed in the rush to affirm the constructive and creative forces linked to Chicana/o mestizaje. Its unsettled racial positionings arise from unresolved miscomprehensions about Indigenous subjectivity even as Chicana/o critics and artists invoke Indigenous ancestry in the service of a liberating social and cultural change. Indeed, the incorporation of signs that point towards Indigenous ancestry remains central to the technologies of liberation articulated in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa's use of Aztec religious imagery becomes a measure of how Chicano (and, significantly, Chicana) creative and critical production strategically invoke self-hatred as a legacy of colonialism. To shift from hatred towards a constructive change requires that an emotional alteration take place:

> Those activities or Coatlicue states which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life . . . propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself. Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences – if we can make meaning out of them – can lead us toward becoming more of who we are.
>
> *(2012, p. 68)*

Anzaldúa associates the Coatlicue state with a painful but creative psychic disruption. She evokes a critical vocabulary that simultaneously valorizes the deployment of Aztec iconography beyond a nationalist script and makes present psychological and philosophical insights through

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a self-conscious cultural mestizaje. As a critical conceptual framework, it foregrounds the promise of transformation, liberation, and release from the destructive forces of colonialism's legacy whereby the birth of the modern man of enlightenment relies on technologies that categorize, administer, and ultimate deny difference.[6]

The impact of Anzaldúa's considerations of a new mestiza consciousness has been transformative in the critical understanding and social significance of Chicana/o culture. We can consider some of these effects in reviewing the profound influence of Anzaldúa's work on later intellectual labor. Cultural critic Chela Sandoval associates Anzaldúa's discussion of the Coatlicue state with Roland Barthes' notion of the "punctum," that which breaks the subject free from repressive emotional conditions (2000, pp. 141ff). This disruption leads to an "abyss beyond dualisms" where, temporarily, "political weapons of consciousness are available in a constant tumult of possibility" (Sandoval 2000, p. 141). The movement beyond dualism, the condition of race mixture made central to representations of Chicana/o identity and culture, becomes integral to transformations in consciousness.

In her writing on political consciousness in *The decolonial imaginary* (1999), Emma Pérez describes this rupture: a "liberatory, amorphous, transitory, translational, trans-identity state for anyone, not just women of color, who desires communication among differences" (1999, p. 145*n97*). Pérez locates the affirming project of Chicana mestizaje in its potential for critical transformation: "*la nueva mestiza*, the mixed-race woman, is the privileged subject of an interstitial space that was formerly a nation, and is now without borders, without boundaries" (1999, p. 25). The celebratory dissolution of national boundaries may be overstated here, but Pérez is absolutely precise when she notes, "Mestizaje, for Anzaldúa, is redefined and remixed into an open consciousness" (1999, p. 25). This formulation may suggest again vagueness and overstatement, a reliance on the complex and elusive notion of consciousness.

Understanding the term as a type of open consciousness foregrounds its most free-form liberatory aspects, yes; but it embodies the still-unresolved contradictions and conflicts of a history born of and bound to the brutality of modernity. In this instance, modernity manifests itself through the technologies of a colonial regime. The borderlessness Pérez identifies in Anzaldúa's Coatlicue state opens up the possibility of relationality beyond duality. It performs ways of living and thinking through the contradictions, conundrums, and impossibilities inherent in the binaristic reflexivity of Enlightenment thought.

Several critics underscore the significance of Anzaldúa's thought as a movement beyond binary constructs. Anzaldúa's insights take Chicana/o discourse into a realm that allows for new relational understandings of identity. Angie Chabram-Dernersesian writes in "On the social construction of whiteness within selected Chicana/o discourses" that Anzaldúa moves well beyond "patriarchal nationalist narratives that plot Chicano histories of expropriation along a unidimensional racial line" (1997, p. 124). The racial multidimensionality of Chicana/o mestizaje can be plotted on other planes of historical, cultural, and social formulations that correspond to and index multiple forms of oppression. That is, racial mutability as a component of self-identification becomes inseparable from and can enact fluidity among other realms of Chicana/o social formation: language, sexuality, gender, religion, national affiliation, etc. Moreover, by conceptualizing identity multidimensionally, Chicana/o identity unfolds as a multiply connected subjectivity. Its articulation may recognize shared forms of oppression across a spectrum of historically aggrieved communities whose experiences and memories have been forged by the rational barbarity of colonialism.

The act of writing serves as a medium for this recognition. In his book *Disrupting savagism* (2001), Arturo Aldama focuses on shared attempts by historically aggrieved groups to neutralize

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repressive discourses about difference. Through her work, Anzaldúa emerges as a "speaking subject-in-process" who grounds her "enunciatory discourse to the materiality of women's bodies traumatized by poverty and colonial, racial, and sexual violence and to the materiality of dispossessed territories to articulate the psychic processes of recovery and decolonization" (Aldama 2001, p. 128). The sensory embodiment of historical trauma leads to an articulation of identity that responds to violence. As part of this articulation, Anzaldúa's writing serves as an enunciatory discourse proclaiming a struggle for decolonial liberation. Her work recovers from a sense of displacement by enacting a new mestiza consciousness articulated through ruptured language. In *Trans-americanity: subaltern modernities, global coloniality, and the cultures of greater Mexico* (2012), José Saldívar points to the "going beyond the two-ness of national consciousness" as a central aspiration of *Borderlands/La Frontera* expressed through "the differential vernacular serpent's tongue, a catachrestic subalternist tongue that is capable of cracking, fracturing, and braiding the very authority of the master's English-only tongue" (Saldívar 2012, p. 18). The writing becomes the ruptured, rupturing mestiza enactment of a fluid consciousness moving through language. The quest for a new language encapsulates the passage undertaken in *Borderlands*.

In this quest Sonia Saldívar-Hull finds the voice of a politically committed queer feminist mestiza. The embodied quality of Anzaldúa's writing forms the basis of critique in Saldívar-Hull's analysis of her work. In *Feminism on the border* (2000), Saldívar-Hull highlights the importance of Anzaldúa's cultural locatedness:

> As a Chicana "totally immersed" in her culture, she can choose to reject the . . . traditions that oppress women and silence homosexual men and women. . . . The feminista that Anzaldúa presents is a woman comfortable with new affiliations that subvert old ways of being, rejecting the homophobic, sexist, racist, imperialist, and nationalist.
>
> *(p. 73)*

Those aspects of Anzaldúa's writing that offer a politically engaged critique of identity within Chicana/o culture permit for new affiliations in political (or politicized) struggle. Anzaldúa and other Chicana theorists "insist on illuminating the complications and intersections of the multiple systems of exploitation: capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and White supremacy" (Ibid., p. 36). Anzaldúa's writing responds to the power of multiple interconnected exploitative discourses. This leads Rubén Medina in "El mestizaje a través de la frontera" (2009) to observe that for Anzaldúa the fundamental problem of ethnic, sexual, and economic oppression is epistemological and played out in the opposition between hegemonic and subaltern cultural consciousness (p. 121). The lasting power of Anzaldúa's recasting lies in its ability to proffer a vision of transformative liberation embodied by those whose lives are most vulnerable to the flows and fluxes of colonialism's enduring currents.

The relevance of a Chicana/o racialized imagination is not bound by the parameters of academic study. The powerful force of Chicana/o mestizaje erupts in such diverse cultural phenomena as lowrider car clubs springing up in São Paulo, Brazil, French intellectuals embracing the deterritorializing qualities of Chicano subjectivity, lowrider Volvos cruising England's country roads, Japanese musicians rapping in Spanglish, and Maori youths tricking out lowrider bicycles and dressing cholo style.

Beyond its impact on various forms of contemporary cultural expression, it has influenced academia in considerable ways. Mary Louise Pratt – former president of the Modern Language Association and author of *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) – has noted that

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Chicano cultural practices form a site "of ongoing critical and inventive interaction with the dominant culture, as contact zones across which significations move in many directions" (Pratt 1993, p. 89). Pratt identifies Anzaldúa, "writing as a Chicana lesbian working-class philosopher," as having "adopted a mestiza perspective from which she advances [an] agenda for the whole society" (Ibid., p. 89). Anzaldúa's work

> adds a relational optic, specifically a way of making claims for the inventiveness and ongoing criticalness of ethnic cultures and minority perspectives. It brings into relief their engagement with other occupants of the contact zone, and their *availability to* reception outside the subnational community.
>
> *(Ibid., pp. 89–90)*

The experience of mestizaje is a double one: collective notions of community in terms of autonomy and authenticity co-exist with a critical sense of relational engagement.

The critical sensibility informing relational engagements points to the influences Anzaldúa's work has had in articulating the importance of intersectionality, which has played a critically significant role in critical race theory. Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, as editors of the influential feminist-of-color anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), address the manner that race and class intersect in the women's movement (Hancock 2016, p. 29). Their work of the era, along with Black feminist pioneers like Audre Lorde and bell hooks, helped formulate the intellectual and ethical framework that has been codified and institutionalized as critical race theory. Known as CRT, it considers the social, legal, educational, and economic structures that make certain identities (gendered, racial, sexual, economic, religious, ethnic) the consequence of and vehicle for vulnerabilities. Such an intersectional understanding of identity and power is evident throughout Anzaldúa's conceptualization and other contemporary understandings of mestizaje in a Chicana/o context.

Anzaldúa's theorizations have influenced a number of distinct realms of academic inquiry. The focus on transculturation, decolonization, and the cultures of slavery and empire that informs the so-called New American Studies results from discursive interrogations Anzaldúa's writings have generated. The development of Hemispheric Studies is partly due to a perspectival reshifting required for an adequate analysis of the U.S. borderlands. And new understandings and castings of mestizaje in Latin American societies, informed by the liberating and resistant dimensions of Chicana/o thought, are enabling long-ignored social identities to stake a claim in national belonging.

Mestizaje represents an empowering dynamic in Chicana/o expressive culture, one echoed in its the formal hybridity, aesthetic experimentation, and transculturation. The power to explain the meaning of lives lived in the racial and social margins of the nation-state finds its correlative in the mixture of styles, languages, forms, and genres that make up the braided, broken, and disrupting shape of Chicana/o culture. It seems to name in form and substance the organically hybrid condition of the Mexican/American subject and experience. But this ontological elision is precisely the generative deception that mestizaje provides. Not an ontological existence, nor the basis for a claim of Indigenous identity, mestizaje enacts a powerful critical discourse. It evokes the fruitful contradictions of identity construction as a historically situated practice of living: a double helix of acceptance and rejection, displacement and relocation, loss and reclamation. This dynamic doubling permits for a renaming and regeneration that suspends in Chicana/o identity an ethical, resistant, empathetic, empowered, and transgressive embodiment: Chicana/o mestizaje.

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Notes

1 A more complex amalgam of African and later Asian people contributed to a cultural and somatic mixture not recognizable to a Mexican nationalist discourse that collapses national identification with race mixture.

2 I use the term "Chicano" rather than "Chicana/o" in much of this chapter to be consistent with the politics of the time of the Chicano movement, where the term "Chicano" was typically viewed as incorporating both males and females. However, in my discussion of mestizaje within contemporary times, I adhere to a feminist critique of male privilege implicit within the term "Chicano" and use "Chicana/o" to refer to both males and females of Mexican descent.

3 The author and co-editors gratefully acknowledge Nicolás Kanellos and Arte Público Press for permission to quote R. Gonzales's "*Yo Soy Joaquín*/I am Joaquín."

4 For a reconsideration of the lived rather than ideologized experience of the condition in contemporary Latin America, Peter Wade in "Rethinking Mestizaje" (2005) and Edward Telles and Graciana García in "*Mestizaje* and Public Opinion in Latin America" (2013) offer nuanced insights into more supple notions of mestizo identity than have been generally ascribed to mixed-race populations.

5 For a fuller understanding of her late-career thought, see *Light in the dark/luz en lo oscuro: rewriting identity, spirituality, reality* (2015), edited and completed by AnaLouise Keating.

6 See Lisa Lowe's *The intimacies of four continents* (2015) for an analysis of the links between colonialism and Western liberalism. Grace Hong in *Death beyond disavowal* (2015) considers how neoliberalism disavows racial, gendered, and sexualized violence as problems of the past and not foundational conditions for our present.

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