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CHICANA/O CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS
Reframing alternative critical discourses

This special issue of Cultural Studies (October 1990) grew out of a panel entitled “Chicana/o Cultural Representations: Reframing Alternative Critical Discourses,” held at the NACS conference in downtown Los Angeles in the Spring of 1989. The theme of the seventeenth conference was: “Community Empowerment and Chicano Scholarship.” The narrative inscribed in the conference theme re-enacts a problematic that has been with us since the origins of the Chicano movement, namely: how does Chicana/o studies enact, articulate, and textualize the community, and how does this narrativization translate into the empowerment of a community? Implicit within this problematic inherited by the Chicana/o intellectuals of the 1990s, and normalized in the course of the Chicano movement, is the age-old question of the relationship between theory, self-representation, and practice. In the course of daily institutional practice in Chicano studies, this narrative is de-problematized to the extent that the evocation of the community as a central subject of Chicano studies operates as a litany that guides our daily academic practices and absolves us of the guilt stemming out of our distance from our non-academic constituency—a distance that is a consequence of our own diaspora from the working-class populations in the factories, fields, and barrios. The implication is, of course, that the creation of a discourse in and of itself will guarantee the empowerment of those dispossessed and non-legitimated sectors of our community. The assumption being that bringing these formally non-thematized subjects into representation will furnish the necessary conditions for Chicano liberation throughout Aztlán.

Our decision to intervene in these yearly gatherings of Chicana/o intellectuals (activists, students, staff, and professors) brought this tension to a climax: by interrogating from a cultural studies perspective, the equation Chicano studies = community empowerment, and the notion of a singular Chicano cultural identity—an identity that had furnished the terms for this equation. The very subtitle of our panel, “Reframing Alternative Critical Discourses,” encapsulates the nature and the purpose of our intervention into representation.
Twenty years ago, the Chicano movement created a space where an alternative cultural production and identity could flourish. The articulation of Chicano studies was in fact a pilgrimage to a shared cultural site where a “true self” (identity and subjectivity) could emerge as an alternative to the dominant regimes of representation. The negative figurations of Chicanas/os within dominant media, academic disciplines, and mainstream culture—stereotypes such as the lazy Mexicans, Frito Bandito, Latin Spit Fire, Chiquita Banana, cultural fatalism, and superstition—were all turned on their heads by the Chicano movement. The Chicano movement was recovering a past in order to undo fragmentation and alienation by stressing our common culture and oneness. In this historical recuperation, what was emphasized was similarity: that we all speak a common language (Spanish/English/bilingualism/caló), share common cultural conditions of economic and political oppression, and a lost geography (Mexico) or a legacy of conquest. One of the most important poems of the movement, “I am Joaquin,” brought this all together:

La Raza!
Mexicano!
Espanol!
Latino!
Hispano!
Chicano!

Or whatever I call myself,
I look the same,
I feel the same,
I cry
and
sing the same.
I am the masses of my people and
I refuse to be absorbed.

(Gonzales 1972: 89)

Aztlan, the legendary homeland of the Aztecs, claimed by Chicano cultural nationalism as the mythical place of the Chicano nation, gave this alternative space a cohesiveness. Chicano identity was framed in Aztlan. And, Aztlan provided a basis for a return to the roots, for a return to an identity before domination and subjugation—a voyage back to pre-Columbian times. In its most extreme cases, Aztlan was said to be located in the deepest layers of consciousness of every Chicano, an identification which thereby posited an essential Chicano subject for cultural identity.

The Chicano movement provided the enabling conditions for us to come into representation and claim our existence as Chicanos by stating as the movement song states: “Yo soy Chicano” (I am a Chicano). The political importance of this historical moment, when “we” as a people contested the dominant culture, was that Chicanos inaugurated their own modes of self-representation. Chicanos emphasized native as opposed to European origins, and they articulated publicly that we were “brown” and that “brown was beautiful.” Reclaiming who we were, the Chicano movement thus created a new space to describe “ourselves.” No longer hyphenated Americans (Spanish-Americans, Mexican-Americans), Hispanics or Pochos (half-breeds), but Chicanos. The term
Chicano was ultimately a term we had coined for ourselves and which "we" invested with a new meaning: Chicano signified the affirmation of working-class and indigenous origins, and the rejection of assimilation, acculturation, and the myth of the American melting pot. Implicit in the term Chicano was a strategic relation and a strategy of struggle that thematized the Chicano community and called for social struggle and reform. In retrospect, while many of these elements of this coming into representation were positive, unfortunately the notion of a Chicano cultural identity was itself often problematic.

In this view, Chicano identity was often a static, fixed, and one-dimensional formulation. It failed to acknowledge our historical differences in addition to the multiplicity of our social and cultural identities as a people. This representation of cultural identity often postulated the notion of a transcendental Chicano subject, at the same time that it assumed that cultural identity existed outside of time and that it was unaffected by changing historical processes. This concept of cultural identity appealed to a cultural formulation composed of binaries: Anglos vs. Chicanos. But more importantly, this mimetic notion of representation obfuscated the fact that the naming of cultural identity was not the same thing as cultural identity, for as Stuart Hall reminds us:

> Though we speak in our names, of ourselves, from our own experience, nonetheless, who it is who speaks and the subject spoken of, are never exactly in the same place. Identity is therefore not transparent; it is not as unproblematic; it is no guarantee of authenticity. Perhaps then instead of thinking identity as an already accomplished historical fact...we should think of identity as a production which is never complete, which is constituted inside, not outside representation.3

Our reframing of Chicana/o cultural identity draws from those theoretical insights elaborated by Hall that frame cultural identity within the problematics of difference, production, and positionality. As we have seen, for authoritative cultural nationalism collective identity is based on a simultaneity and continuity between the object and its representation. In this way, the critical points of difference are overlooked. These critical points of difference, and the experience of rupture and discontinuity, also shape our identities in decisive ways: for instance, the variable experiences of migration, conquest, and regional variation. Stuart Hall furnishes a more adequate reformulation by stating that “cultural identity is neither continuous nor constantly interrupted but constantly framed between the vectors of continuity, similarity and difference.”

Representations are embodied in the forms and practices of culture, and it is this productive relation that Chicano movement representations often failed to recognize. Little attention was given to examining how specific cultural productions were constructed, and to identifying significant institutional constraints on cultural production. Further yet, the excessive emphasis on content precluded attention to the delimitations often imposed by form. Authoritative movement discourses failed to acknowledge the partiality of representation, the fact that it is an artifice and a social construction, and that “Chicano” representations did not even encompass the complexity of Chicana/o cultural and social identities. What was glaringly absent from these Chicano movement representations were women’s and working-class forms and practices, and alternative sexual identities.
The short-sightedness of Chicano studies intellectuals was that they assumed that the construction of their own self-representations as subjects was equivalent to that of the totality of the Chicana/o experience, and that this shared representation could always be generalized in the interests of the entire group. This myopia did not permit them to see that this new representation would be alien to other Chicanas/os who had their own self-representations, their own forms and practices of resistance, which predated and were oftentimes in open conflict with the academic formulation of cultural identity. How else could we explain that an ahistorical “Aztec” identity would fall on the deaf ears of an urban community versed in the rhythms of disco, conjunto music, and boleros?

By recuperating the mythic pre-Columbian past and formulating this as the basis of our shared identity, Chicano academic intellectuals of the postcolonial condition failed to see that cultural identities have histories, that they undergo constant transformation, and that far from being etched in the past, cultural identities are constantly being constructed. As Hall proposes:

Cultural identity is not a universal spirit . . . not a fixed once-and-for-all, not a phantasm . . . Rather cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of suture which are made in the discourses of history and culture. Hence there is always a politics of identity because as Gramsci says, there is always a war of positions.

Our purpose in this volume is to respond to what we consider to be the predication of double-positioning. First, we are responding to the mode in which the Chicano movement has positioned us as intellectuals, as cultural practitioners, and as community subjects. Second, we are addressing the way in which mainstream critical theory has positioned us within cultural discourse. The type of positioning that we are contesting in this case is apparent in the Euro-American post-structuralist movement, which has reified the Chicana/o experience under an abstract generalizing category of “difference,” a concept which promotes a pluralist ideology that readily maintains the canonical tradition squarely in place. At the same time, post-structuralists’ differential equations have usually dichotomized the social formation into a black-white division (binary) that obscures and reifies the Mexican origin population. In addition, post-structuralism’s reappropriation of the de-centered conditions of marginal peoples of color has robbed us of our own theoretical and cultural specificity. As peoples of color, we have been perennially displaced within the “play of endless sliding signification.”

In the face of post-structuralism’s particularly distorted constitution of the Chicana/o as a mute, de-centered subject, we strive to re-center critical cultural theory in our own social historical experiences and vernaculars, using these as a means of drawing critical attention to those practices and representations that Euro-American text-specific theories silence. Certainly, post-structuralism’s concept of “difference” (here, a category used to describe the cultural identities of peoples of color) should also be scrutinized. This notion subsumes ethnic identities into a universal category of difference without attention to our specific historical internal differences. Furthermore, this notion of difference is predicated on a singularity that takes as its center the Western speaking subject, and posits that all peoples of color are different from this subject yet transparent among themselves. Post-structuralism has done much to circulate the myth that difference is a recent (Western) invention; however, difference is a fundamental
part of the historical legacies of colonized and displaced peoples. All one needs to do to find the complexities of similarities and difference among ethnic groups is to travel to downtown Los Angeles and witness the peoples of diaspora and conquest, the Native Americans, Central Americans, Chicanas/os, Asian Americans, and African Americans—the people of color who all exemplify what Hall calls the dynamic “vectors of similarity and continuity and difference.”

In our special issue of Chicana/o representations in Cultural Studies, we seek therefore to recuperate what was silenced from the Chicano movement and cultural movements such as post-structuralism, and to give voice to historically persistent forms and practices of resistance. This enunciation is necessary if cultural studies are to begin to respond effectively to the complexities of a historical experience, fissured by race, class, gender, by linguistic discourses and by competing nation(alities), and constructed by a myriad of cultural forms, some incorporated, others not fully incorporated. In a sense our own response to this exclusion and reification by mainstream critical theory was a collective response. But the nature of this collective response takes issue with Abdul Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd’s claim that “the collective nature of all minority discourse necessarily derives from the fact that minority individuals are always treated and forced to experience themselves generically.” Under their vision, the minority intellectual who is “[c]oerced into a negative, generic subject position” responds by “transforming that position into a positive collective one.” Given that we share an indigenous legacy that foregrounds collectivity as the basis of self-representation, what we are questioning is whether our collectivity is simply derivative of conquest and subjugation. Quite the contrary, we have come to recognize that our own carefully “negotiated” collective traditions offer a challenging response to the (predominant) European philosophical subject’s logocentric “I.”

Drawing from the legacy of the Chicano movement, which first launched a war of positions, our interventions are intended to thematize and reinscribe the double-positioning of Chicana/o productions by scrutinizing the forms of self-representation that are both internal as well as external to the alternative sector. Initially, Chicano academic intellectuals positioned themselves against the dominant culture and its regimes of representation as well as against the vendidos (the sell-outs), the power brokers, the Mexican-Americans and their distorted or emasculating self-images. Our Chicana/o cultural studies interventions represent an added layer to this war of positions, for at a third level, these interventions interrogate those forms and practices of self-representation inherited from the Chicano movement itself, through an analysis of the cultural institutions, practices, educational and critical theory, and cultural forms in literature, theater, film, and ethnography. Together these critical interventions suggest more complex formulations of cultural identity that speak to the multiplicity of subject positions inhabited by Chicanas/os, and they challenge a variety of other inherited assumptions, including the assumption that “Chicano” discourse is by its very nature progressive, the assumption that Chicanas/os can or should repress the conditions of their intellectual production, and the assumption that patriarchal nationalism can articulate oppositional forms of collective struggle.

On a larger scale, our objective in this issue is to impart a consciousness of the forms of representation that are deployed within Chicana/o productions, and their dual framing and limitations, in order that we may retain the critical legacy inherited by the Chicano movement—a legacy that promoted self-criticisms, analysis, and the
need for alternative paradigms. At the same time that we are conscious of the need to scrutinize and reframe Chicana/o representations, we are also motivated by the political ramifications of constituting this critique. We live in an era in which Chicanas/os are increasingly among the most impoverished groups in the United States. In the southwest, Chicanas/os are rapidly becoming the largest minority population, yet we also remain one of the most marginalized groups in all the sectors of US society. Given this historical profile and given the upsurge of conservative ideology, there is an urgency and a necessity for retaining the visionary and political dimensions of our intellectual practice. This progressive humanism is the legacy that we have inherited from the movement, and one that we seek to reactivate.

Our intervention implies, in addition to scrutinizing our cultural productions, we must, at this historical moment, draw the distinction between political identity and cultural identity that Stuart Hall so eloquently summarized in a recent lecture entitled: “Speaking for the Subject.” Political identity often requires, as Hall has said, the need to make conscious commitments. Thus it may be necessary to momentarily abandon the multiplicity of cultural identities for “more simple ones around which political lines have been drawn.” As Hall continues: “You need all the folks together, under one hat, saying we are this, for the purpose of this fight, we are all the same, just black, and just here. Our politics has depended on that.” And that is what identity is (in this configuration), “the subject position of a political practice.”

Our theoretical intervention does not presuppose that cultural theory is a blueprint for action, but quite the contrary, that theory is an “attempt to find translatable patterns in what has happened, construable and renderable in that they can be used to help understand other situations and prevent repeating mistakes.” In our attempt to reactivate the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, some of our strengths as well as mistakes are examined through these interventions. Finally, our interventions reflect the predicament of alternative “minority” (majority?) discourse in the 1990s.

This discourse must contend with a formidable set of problematics which includes: unearthing repressed cultural forms and theories; locating the limitations of critical paradigms that not only fail to reflect our lived conditions and productions, but, in fact, deform them; contending with material underrepresentation in US society; and responding to the insights gained from earlier Chicana/o critical legacies, grounded in Marxism and feminism, which both critiqued racism and brought the aforementioned elements to our attention. Given that these formidable problematics will continue to occupy the attention of “minority” scholars for some time, our intervention at this moment can only be tentative. Future “minority” intellectuals will have to contend not only with the conversion of cultural theory and minority discourse, but also with locating the circumstances that have permitted these types of cultural critiques to emerge among Chicanas/os precisely at this moment in time. Certainly token assimilation within the academy has allowed us to recognize that dominant cultural theory (post-structuralism, ethnography, postmodernism, etc.) acknowledges the existence of the “other” but, undeniably, it has also failed to give the “others” (Chicanas/os, blacks, Native Americans, Asian Americans) an equal position as subjects. As Michel de Certeau reminds us, “intellectuals are still borne on the backs of the common people” (de Certeau 1984: 25). In our assessment, mainstream Euro-American intellectuals within the academy have been borne on the backs of people of color in this country, including “minority” intellectuals. It is the job of the “minority” intellectual to remind them of this fact.
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Chapter 6

Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano

GLORIA ANZALDÚA'S

BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA

Cultural studies, "difference," and
the non-unitary subject

In 1979, Audre Lorde denounced the pernicious practice of the "Special
Third World Women's Issue" (1981: 100). Ten years later, the title of one of the
chapters in Trinh T. Minh-ha's Woman, Native, Other—"Difference: A Special Third
World Women's Issue"—alludes to the lingering practice of acknowledging the subject
of race and ethnicity, but placing it on the margins conceptually through "special
issues" of journals or "special panels" at conferences. In her "Feminism and Racism: A
criticized the conference's structure, which designated one consciousness-raising group
for women of color yet offered proliferating choices for white women (60). Nine years
later, a conference at UCLA on "Feminist Theory and the Question of the Subject" repli-
cated this scenario, presenting a plenitude of panels on different aspects of the question
of the subject, while marking off a space for "minority discourse" that simultaneously
revealed the unmarked status of the generic (white) subject of the other panels. Isaac
Julien and Kobena Mercer (1988), the guest editors of a special issue of Screen, formulate
its title as an ironic question: "The Last Special Issue on Race?" They point out that
the logic of the "special" issue or panel reinforces the perceived otherness and margin-
ality of the subject itself. In their critique, they invite us to identify the relations of
power/knowledge that determine which cultural issues are intellectually prioritized in
the first place—to examine the force of a binary relationship that produces the marginal
as a consequence of the authority invested in the center.

Cultural studies would appear to provide ideal terrain for the mapping of this new
paradigm, with its "commitment to examining cultural practices from the point of view
of relations of power" and its understanding of culture as both "object of study and site
of political critique and intervention" (Grossberg et al. 1992: 5). However, it is impor-
tant to keep in mind that the current attention to the intersections of race, nation,
sexuality, class, and gender within cultural studies is the result of struggles initiated by
people of color within the British movement to construct "new political alliances based
on non-essential awareness of racial difference" (Ibid.). Lata Mani and bell hooks, among others, express concern at cultural studies' potential failure to articulate a new politics of difference—"appropriating issues of race, gender and sexual practice, and then continuing to hurt and wound in that politics of domination" (hooks et al. 1992: 294).

In what follows, I will examine Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of mestiza or border consciousness, and its contribution to paradigmatic shifts in theorizing difference, as well as contentious issues in the reception of this text: on one hand, the enthusiastic embrace of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) by many white feminists and area scholars and, on the other, the critiques voiced by some critics, particularly Chicana/o academicians.

Given the conceptual difficulty involved in theorizing difference, it is understandable that a text like *Borderlands* would be warmly received. But, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out, the proliferation of texts by women of color is not necessarily evidence of the decentering of the hegemonic subject (1991: 34). Of crucial importance is the way the texts are read, understood, and located. Two potentially problematic areas in the reception of *Borderlands* are the isolation of this text from its conceptual community, and the pitfalls in universalizing the theory of mestiza or border consciousness, which the text painstakingly grounds in specific historical and cultural experiences.

Unlike Sandoval's use of the adjectives "oppositional" or "differential" in her theory of consciousness, Anzaldúa's choice of the terms "border" and particularly "mestiza" problematizes the way her theory travels. Clearly, non-Chicana readers and critics may relate to the "miscegenation" and "border crossing" in their own lives and critical practices. For example, in her discussion of David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*, Marjorie Garber uses the term "border crossings" in a way similar to Anzaldúa to describe the activity of presenting binarisms (West/East, male/female) in order to put them into question (1992: 130). The point is not to deny the explanatory power of Anzaldúa's model, but to consider the expense of generalizing moves that deracinate the psychic "borderlands" and "mestiza" consciousness from the United States/Mexican border and the racial miscegenation accompanying the colonization of the Americas that serve as the material reality for Anzaldúa's "theory in the flesh." If every reader who identifies with the border-crossing experience described by Anzaldúa's text sees her/himself as a "New mestiza," what is lost in terms of the erasure of difference and specificity?

Other readings are possible that resist the impulse to read the text as one looks in a mirror. Elizabeth Spelman cautions against what she calls "boomerang perception: I look at you and come right back to myself" (1988: 12). Appropriative readings are precluded by the constant interrogation of the conditions and locations of reading. It is one thing to choose to recognize the ways one inhabits the "borderlands," and quite another to theorize a consciousness in the name of survival, to transform "living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience" (Anzaldúa 1987: 73).

A useful strategy in teaching or reading *Borderlands* is to locate both reader and text: the reader, vis-à-vis plural centers and margins, and the text, within traditions of theorizing multiply embodied subjectivities by women of color and living in the borderlands by Chicanas and Chicanos. Contextualizing the book in this manner, rather than reading it in a vacuum, helps avoid the temptation to pedestalize or even fetishize *Borderlands* as the invention of one unique individual. Given the text's careful charting of mestiza consciousness in the political geography of one particular border, reading it as part of a collective Chicano negotiation around the meanings of historical and cultural
hybridity would further illuminate the process of “theorizing in the flesh,” of producing theory through one’s own lived realities. Angie Chabram-Dernersesian documents Chicana texts dating from the early 1970s that represent “shifting positionality, variously enlisting competing interests and alliances throughout time and space” and “multiple evocations of a female speaking subject who affirms various racial identities” (1992: 85, 89). Women of color thinkers such as Sandoval and the writers in Bridge were developing notions of multiple subjectivity in a context of political resistance in the early 1980s. In the mid-1980s, Chicano artists such as David Avalos and the Border Arts Workshop attempted to expose, or even to celebrate, the political and economic contradictions of the border that sustain the officially illegal, but unofficially sanctioned, market in undocumented workers from Mexico. In Chicano/o criticism, the border constitutes a powerful organizing category in such works as Sonia Saldívar-Hull’s “Feminism on the Border: From Gender Politics to Geopolitics” and the collection Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology, edited by Héctor Calderón and José David Saldivar.

In her discussion of “detrerritorializations,” the displacement of identities, persons, and meanings endemic to the postmodern world system, Caren Kaplan examines the process of “reterritorialization” in the movement between centers and margins, and how that process of reterritorialization is different for First World and Third World peoples. For Kaplan, the challenge of the First World feminist critic is to avoid “theoretical tourism” (or in the case of Anzaldúa’s text, becoming “borderers in the borderlands”), “to avoid appropriating . . . through romanticization, envy, or guilt” (1990: 194) by examining her simultaneous occupation of both centers and margins: “Any other strategy merely consolidates the illusion of marginality while glossing over or refusing to acknowledge centralities” (Ibid.: 189). Rather than assuming Anzaldúa’s metaphors as overarching constructs for like-minded theoretical endeavors, it might be more helpful to set them alongside the metaphors garnered from the rigorous examination of one’s own lived personal and collective history. Kaplan argues that recognizing one’s own processes of displacement “is not a process of emulation” (Ibid.: 194); Minnie Bruce Pratt states: “I am compelled by my own life to strive for a different place than the one we have lived in” (48-49; quoted in Kaplan 1990: 364).

Universalizing readings of Borderlands occur in the larger “postmodern” context of increasing demarginalization of the cultural practices of people of color as well as the simultaneous destabilizing of certain “centered” discourses of cultural authority and legitimation (Julien and Mercer 1988). Although many critics of the postmodern proclaim, either nostalgically or celebratorily, the end of this and that, very few focus the crisis of meaning, representation, and history in terms of the “possibility of the end of Euro-ethnocentrism” (Ibid.: 2). Stuart Hall, former director of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and a black Jamaican who migrated to England, savored the irony of the centering of marginality at a conference entitled “The Real Me: Post-modernism and the Question of Identity”:

Thinking about my own sense of identity, I realize that it has always depended on the fact of being a migrant, on the difference from the rest of you. So one of the fascinating things about this discussion is to find myself centered at last. Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centered. What I’ve thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes,
paradoxically, to be the representative modern experience! This is "coming home" with a vengeance! Most of it I much enjoy—welcome to migranthood.

(Hall 1987: 44)

Hall sees it as an important gain that "more and more people now recognize . . . that all identity is constructed across difference," but he also insists that narratives of displacement have "certain conditions of existence, real histories in the contemporary world, which are not only or exclusively psychical, not simply 'journeys of the mind'" (Ibid.: 44). Whereas Jean Baudrillard and other Eurocentric postmodernists explain the fragmentation of identity in relation to the end of the Real, Hall refers here to what some have called the Real that one cannot not know, the "jagged edges" of poverty and racism.5

For this reason, Hall proposes the possibility of another kind of "politics of difference." New political identities can be formed by insisting on difference that is concretely conceived as "the fact that every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history." This conception of the self allows for a politics that constitutes "unities-in-difference" (Ibid.: 45), a politics of articulation, in which the connections between individuals and groups do not arise from "natural" identity but must be articulated, in the dual sense of "expressed in speech" and "united by forming a joint."6

Anzaldúa's Borderlands exemplifies the articulation between the contemporary awareness that all identity is constructed across difference, and the necessity of a new politics of difference to accompany this new sense of self. Dorinne Kondo points out the difference between deconstructions of fixed identity that "open out" the self to a "free play of signifiers," and Anzaldúa's representation of multiple identity in the "play of historically and culturally specific power relations" (1990: 23). While Anzaldúa's writing recognizes the importance of narratives of displacement in the formation of her subjectivity, she is also aware of the material conditions of existence, the real histories of these narratives. Hers is a "power-sensitive analysis that would examine the construction of complex shifting 'selves' in the plural, in all their cultural, historical, and situational specificity" (Ibid.: 26).7

Borderlands maps a sense of "the plurality of self" (Alarcón 1990: 366), which Anzaldúa calls mestizo or border consciousness. This consciousness emerges from a subjectivity structured by multiple determinants—gender, class, sexuality, and contradictory membership in competing cultures and racial identities. Sandoval has theorized this sense of political identity that allows no single conceptualization of our position in society as a skill developed by those marginalized in the categories of race, sex, or class, for reading the shifting of the webs of power (1990: 66–67). She sees the term "women of color" not as a single unity but as a conscious strategy, a new kind of community based on the strength of diversities as the source of a new kind of political movement. Her theory legitimates the multiplicity of tactical responses to the mobile circulation of power and meaning, and poises a new, shifting subjectivity capable of reconfiguring and recentering itself, depending on the forms of oppression to be confronted. Anzaldúa enacts this consciousness in Borderlands as a constantly shifting process or activity of breaking down binary dualisms and creating the third space, the in-between, border, or interstice that allows contradictions to co-exist in the production of the new element (mestizaje, or hybridity). Crucial in her project are the ways "race" works in the complex "interdefining" and "interacting" among the various aspects of her identity.8 Her essay "La Prieta" (the dark-skinned girl or woman), published in Bridge, already introduced
The concerns she will explore in Borderlands: her relationship to her dark Indian self, and the denial of the indigenous in Chicano/Mexicano culture. It is the representation of the indigenous in the text that has evoked the most critical response from Chicana/o and non-Chicana/o readers alike.

Primary among these concerns are what are seen as the text's essentializing tendencies, most notably in the reference to "the Indian woman" and the privileging of the pre-Columbian deity Coatlicue, which obscures the plight of present-day native women in the Americas. This wariness toward the invocation of "Indianness" and the pre-Columbian pantheon must be contextualized in the contemporary critique of the cultural nationalism of the Chicano Movement, which engineered a romanticized linking between Chicanos and indigenous cultures as part of the process of constructing a Chicano identity. Many of us are engaged in an ongoing interrogation of the singular Chicano cultural identity posited by dominant masculinist and heterosexist discourses of the Chicano Movement, and the role indigenismo played in this exclusionary process.

This seems to me to be the crucial distinction between the project of such Chicano Movement artists as Luis Valdez or Alurista, and Anzaldúa's project in Borderlands: whereas the first invoked indigenismo in the construction of an exclusionary, singular Chicano identity, the latter invokes it in the construction of an inclusive, multiple one. The theory of mestiza consciousness depends on an awareness of subject positions—a concept that Diana Fuss maintains represents the essence of social constructionism (1989: 29)—working against the solidifying concept of a unitary or essential "I." Fuss suggests that the seeming impasse between "essentialism" and "social constructionism" is actually a false dichotomy, and she calls attention to the ways they are deeply and inextricably co-implicated (Ibid.: xii). Perhaps more productive (and more interesting) than firing off the label "essentialist" as a "term of infallible critique," to ask what motivates the deployment of essentialism (Ibid.: xi), which carries in itself the potential for both progressive and reactionary uses. In her discussion of subaltern studies, Gayatri Spivak speaks of the "Strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (1987: 205), an analysis that would focus "essentialist" moves in Borderlands in terms of "who," "how," and "where": the lack of privilege of the writing subject, the specific deployment of essentialism, and "where its effects are concentrated" (Fuss 1989: 20).

On more than one occasion in the text, Anzaldúa, who as a Chicana lesbian of working-class origins enjoys no privilege in the categories of race, culture, gender, class, or sexuality, explicitly articulates her project: "belonging nowhere, since some aspect of her multiple identity always prohibits her from feeling completely "at home" in any one of the many communities in which she holds membership, she will create her own "home" through writing:

I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, . . . to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (1987: 22)

Mestiza consciousness is not a given but must be produced, or "built" ("lumber," "bricks and mortar," "architecture"). It is spatialized ("A piece of ground to stand on," (Ibid.: 23)),

the temporarily aware-
racialized ("mestiza"), and presented as a new mythology, a new culture, a non-dualistic perception and practice:

The future depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—la mestiza creates a new consciousness.

(Ibid.: 80)

In Borderlands, this new consciousness is created through writing; Anzaldúa’s project is one of discursive self-formation. Through writing, she constructs a consciousness of difference, not in adversary relation to the Same, but as what Alarcón calls the “site of multiple voicing” (1990: 365) or what Trinh calls “critical difference from myself” (1989: 89).

The evocation of essentialism in the text is in the service of a constructionist project, the production of a border or mestiza consciousness that gives voice and substance to subjects rendered mute and invisible by hegemonic practices and discourses, and is understood as the necessary prelude to political change (Ibid.: 87).

Borderlands’ emphasis on the elaboration of a consciousness that emerges from an awareness of multiple subjectivity not only contributes to the development of a new paradigm for theorizing difference, but also addresses aspects of identity formation for which theories of subjectivity alone are unable to account. Only theories of consciousness, such as Anzaldúa’s or Sandoval’s, can elucidate what Richard Johnson calls “structural shifts or major re-arrangements of a sense of self, especially in adult life” (1986/1987: 68). In his article “What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?” Johnson, who followed Hall as director of the CCCS, distinguishes between subjectivity and consciousness:

Subjectivity includes the possibility . . . that some elements or impulses are subjectively active . . . without being consciously known. . . . It focuses on the “who I am” or, as important, the “who we are” of culture. . . . Consciousness embraces the notion of a consciousness of self and an active mental and moral self production.

(Ibid.: 44)

Anzaldúa’s construction of mestiza consciousness helps us begin to explain what Johnson calls the subjective aspects of struggle . . . [that] moment in subjective flux when social subjects . . . produce accounts of who they are, as conscious political agents, that is, constitute themselves, politically. . . . Subjects are contradictory, “in process,” fragmented, produced. But human beings and social movements also strive to produce some coherence and continuity, and through this, exercise some control over feelings, conditions and destinies.

(Ibid.: 69)

One axis for the enactment of mestiza consciousness in Anzaldúa’s text is the use of personal histories and private memories that necessarily entail a context of political struggle. Another privileged site for the construction of border consciousness is
Coatlicue, Lady of the Serpent Skirt, a pre-Columbian deity similar to India's Kali in her non-dualistic fusion of opposites—both destruction and creation, male and female, light and dark. The text's emphasis on Coatlicue has sparked the criticism that Anzaldúa compresses and distorts Mexican history. While Mexicanists and historians may have good reason to be disgruntled at Anzaldúa's free handling of pre-Columbian history, it appears to me that the text's investment is less in historical accuracy than in the imaginative appropriation and redefinition of Coatlicue in the service of creating a new mythos, textually defined as "a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave" (Anzaldúa 1987: 80).

In her article "Chicana Feminism: In the Tracks of 'the' Native Woman," Alarcón stresses a two-pronged process in Chicana writers' treatment of the Indian woman: invocation and recodification (1990: 252). Chicana writers reappropriate the native woman on their own feminist terms because of the multiple ways the Chicana body has been racialized in discourses on both sides of the border (Ibid.: 251). Their purpose is not to "recover a lost 'utopia' nor the 'true' essence of our being," but rather to bring into focus, by invoking "the maligned and abused indigenous woman," "the cultural and psychic dismemberment that is linked to imperialist racist and sexist practices" (Ibid.: 251). Alarcón cites Anzaldúa's "Coatlicue state," the continuous effort of consciousness to "make sense" of it all, as an example of this invocation and recodification of the native woman in the exploration of racial and sexual experience (Ibid.: 251). For me, criticisms of essentialism or elitism in Anzaldúa's use of Coatlicue are short-sighted in light of her function in Anzaldúa's project of pluralizing the unitary subject and dealing with difference in a non-hierarchical fashion (Anzaldúa 1987: 46).

Yet another area of contention is that Borderlands offers a spectacle of the painful splits that constitute Chicanas' multiple positioning for the voyeuristic delectation of European American readers. In the foreword to the second edition of Bridge, Anzaldúa herself seems to be aware of the backfiring potential of feeding non-Chicana readers' perception that being a person of color is an exclusively negative experience: "Perhaps like me you are tired of suffering and talking about suffering. . . . Like me you may be tired of making a tragedy of our lives. . . . [L]et's abandon this autocannibalism: rage, sadness, fear" (iv; emphasis in original). Other artists who use the border as a sign of multiplicity have been criticized for the opposite, for an excessive or inappropriate celebratoriness.

Some artists and writers in Tijuana question what they see as the "euphemized vision" of the contradictions and uprootedness of the border in the work of Guillermo Gómez Peña and others in the Border Arts Workshop, and their bilingual publication La Línea Quebrada/The Broken Line (discussed in García Canclini 1989). These other cultural workers on the border reject what they see as the celebration of migrations often caused by poverty in the place of origin, a poverty repeated in the new destination.

It seems to me that different readings of Anzaldúa's text, for different reasons, could emphasize either the positivity or negativity of "living in the Borderlands." What strikes me is the emphasis she places on the work involved in transforming the pain and isolation of "in-between-ness" into an empowering experience through the construction of mestiza consciousness in writing. Anzaldúa does describe the paralyzing tensions of her multiple positionings:

Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified,
she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between
the different worlds she inhabits. (1987: 20)

But she also figures the “Coatlicue state,” the effort to “make sense” of contradictory
experience, in the language of undocumented border crossings: “to cross over, to make
a hole in the fence and walk across, to cross the river . . . kicking a hole out of the old
boundaries of the self and slipping under and over” (Ibid.: 49). While she turns the pain
of living in the psychic and material borderlands into a strength, she never loses sight
of the concrete processes of displacement.

*Borderlands* is marked by such contradictory movements: the pain and strength of
living in the borderlands, a preoccupation with the “deep . . . underlying structure” and
the affirmation that “the bones often do not exist prior to the flesh” (Ibid.: 66), *la facultad*
as both a dormant “sixth sense” and a “survival tactic” developed by the marginalized
(Ibid.: 39). Since, as Mohanty points out, the “uprooting of dualistic thinking . . . is
fundamentally based on knowledges which are often contradictory” (1991: 37), *mestiza*
consciousness involves “negotiating these knowledges, not just taking a simple counter-
stance” (Ibid.: 36). 15 Adopting the “new *mestiza*” subject position requires

developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. . . .
Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into
something, else. . . . That third element is a new consciousness . . . and
though it is a source of intense Pain, its energy comes from continual creative
motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm.
(Anzaldúa 1987: 79–80; my emphasis)

The cultural practice of the new *mestiza* is also a political practice made possible by the
achievement of awareness and acceptance of the plural self (Ibid.: 87). In its emphasis
on the inner struggle, *Borderlands* provokes thought on the relationship between indi-
vidual transformation and social change (Ibid.: 87). As Hall suggests, the new conception
of the non-unitary self, or *mestiza* consciousness, allows for a politics of articulation,
not of essential unity or correspondence, but of “unities-in-difference.” In this spirit,
Anzaldúa proposes coalitions with men, particularly Mexican/Chicano men, who are
willing to become anti-sexist—to unlearn the Virgin/Malinche duality and to put
Coatlicue back in Guadalupe—and with white people of both sexes who are willing to
become anti-racist—to learn all peoples’ histories of oppression and resistance.

It is my hope that the kind of contextualized readings I propose of *Borderlands*
might alleviate problematic areas in the reception of the book that have to do with
reading out of context, either deracinating the text from its various communal tradi-
tions or seizing on textual moments without taking the whole into account. A
contextualized reading of *Borderlands* locates *mestiza* consciousness and the indigenous,
particularly Coatlicue, within a textual movement that replicates the movement of
border consciousness itself. This process, constantly “breaking down the unitary aspect”
of each previous textual moment, leaves no home but the discursive production of
consciousness itself, a consciousness linked with political activity.
Notes

2. The term “differential” appears in her 1991 article in *Genders*.
3. Is it stylistic or conceptual restriction that leads the editors of *Nationalisms and Sexualities* to write: “Elaborated over the past twenty years in socialist-feminist, psychoanalytic, and deconstructive thought and in the writings of women of color, this insight...” (Parker et al. 1992: 4)?
4. Trinh T. Minh-ha calls on the reader to “assert her difference (not individualizing her perception) but setting into relief the type of individualization that links her (whether centrally or marginally) as an individual to the systems of dominant values” (1991: 113).
5. See the interview with Cornel West in *Universal Abandon?* (Ross 1988).
6. This new conception of politics “requires us to begin, not only to speak the language of dispersal, but also the language of, as it were, contingent closures of articulation” (Hall 1987: 45). Hall discusses his use of the theory of “articulation,” as developed by Ernesto Laclau in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977), in the interview with Lawrence Grossberg (1986), “On Postmodernism and Articulation.”
7. See also Mohanty on Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness:

   Thus, unlike a Western, postmodernist notion of agency and consciousness, which often announces the splintering of the subject, and privileges multiplicity in the abstract, this is a notion of agency born of history and geography. It is a theorization of the materiality and politics of the everyday struggles of Chicanas.
   
   (1991: 37)

8. Katie King uses these terms to counteract the reductive notion of simultaneous oppressions or occupation of the subject positions, in favor of a model of “overlapping necessities” (1990: 86).
9. See, for example, Rosaura Sánchez’s critique (1990).
10. See, for example, Fregoso and Chabram’s introduction to *Cultural Studies* (1990).
11. I use both “Anzaldúa” and “the writing subject” to refer to the mediated “I”, of the text.
13. For Spelman, the denial of the positive aspects of racial identities is linked to seeing racism as a product of sexism (1988: 124).
14. It is in the context of writing (in “Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink” from *Borderlands*) that Anzaldúa articulates (in Hall’s dual sense) the passage from negativity to positivity quoted here:

   When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. . . . It is this learning to live with la Coatlicue that transforms living in the Borderlands from
a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else.

(1987: 73)

For the repudiation of the counterstance, see Anzaldúa (1987: 78).

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Chapter 15

Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano

SEXUALITY AND CHICANA/O STUDIES

Toward a theoretical paradigm for the twenty-first century

The protests and hunger strikes of 1994 at Stanford, UCLA and UC Santa Barbara remind us that the university is not a friendly place for Chicana/o studies. Everything we achieve has to be struggled for, and if we stop pushing in order to further our academic project within the university, to simply go about the business of being students, staff and faculty, the hard-won ground we have gained begins to erode from beneath our feet. We face harsh realities as academics, such as the fact that the numbers of faculty, students and staff, especially staff in high-ranking positions, and particularly the number of Latinas in those high positions, have not significantly increased from their levels of twenty years ago.

These realities oblige us to reconsider the popular conception in Chicana/o studies of the breach between the university and the “community” we were created to serve (Chabram, 1990). This division can lead to an exclusive definition of the subject of Chicana/o studies as the most disadvantaged, marginalized, usually male and heterosexual subject. The positioning of the academic as somehow “outside” of the community reveals a lingering reluctance to theorize and deploy a political agency from our own socio-economic location. We are now beginning to reconceptualize the populations of Chicana/o faculty, students and staff in the universities as a kind of embattled community in itself, and to undertake what Angie Chabram calls “a critical analysis of the lived experiences of Chicano/Chicana intellectuals in their multiple sites” (Chabram, 1990: 243).

At the same time, recent setbacks, ever-present obstacles to progress, and the need for militant action to establish and protect minimal academic programs for our discipline validate the founding ideologies of Chicana/o studies, under the auspices of a nationalism understood to be a contestatory ground for a critique of and resistance to social, economic and racial domination under the US state, of which the university is a part. In its multiply besieged positionality, Chicana/o studies contributes to our repertory of images and narratives about our identity, shared values and interests, producing and reconstructing histories that mythologize or demystify the past, the present situation, and the collective desire for a better future.
In her talk at Stanford University in spring 1994, Wahneema Lubiano offered an insightful critical agenda for ethnic studies in thinking about nationalism. For Lubiano, the heart of black nationalism’s project is a critique of the US state’s prescriptions for the social formation and is ought to be. It is within these dominant notions of social formation and ideal social subject that Chicanas and Chicanos have been racialized, exploited and excluded in the US. But nationalism can simultaneously reinscribe the functions of the state within its own narratives of resistance, by prescribing its own ideas of the ideal social formation and setting the parameters for acceptable forms and images of national identity. This internal repression often occurs in narratives of the family, in which our self-imaginings are cast in patriarchal and heterosexist molds that restrict the possible gamut of roles for women and men. Our task for what remains of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, then, is to retain the contestatory critique of US state domination, while exercising increased vigilance over the ways our own narratives can dominate and exclude.

Even as we regroup under certain nationalist narratives in response to outside pressures, increasing internal debate poses “being Chicano” as an open-ended identity. The response to this critique, developed by many Chicana and Chicano thinkers, may be to fall back on the “family” as a trope for centering an idealized notion of culture or community (Gilroy, 1991). As internal diversity becomes more visible and audible, alternatives to this narrative of homogeneity compete with the desire to forget our differences in the image of the “race-as-family,” which reproduces itself ethnically and culturally through women (Gilroy, 1991: 307).

The impulse to police the political correctness of Chicano cultural representations vis-à-vis the dominant culture relates to a binary concept of Chicano identity: “us” (the race-as-family) versus “them.” Separatist ideologies, expressed in certain nationalist rhetoric, support other borders that must not be crossed: self/other, straight/queer, male/female. As Gloria Anzaldúa points out in Borderlands, the feeling of safety in the “home” of the separate group demands an exclusion. The “positive image” of identity will always entail repressing the “others” within the culture. In attempts to maintain certain cultural borders defining racial and sexual identity, the term “Chicano” can be monopolized to exclude “non-ideal” others who identify as part of that community: women, queers and the racially diverse (Julien, 1991).

This examination of the sources of exclusion both outside and inside our communities encourages dialogue over the cultural construction of gender roles and the recognition of diverse racial and sexual identities. Our social identification as a “community” (which we may call nationalism) manifests itself in Chicana/o studies. The term “cultural nationalism” stresses the importance of culture as a medium of domination and resistance, stereotyping and self-affirmation, given the lack of economic resources, land or full political participation of Chicanas/os as a social group or “nation.” One of our ongoing discussions as Chicana/o intellectuals is and has been this prominence of the cultural. The crux of the “cultural” in “nationalism” is to avoid the potential eclipse of economic factors and class relations or the possibility of a more radical restructuring of society, in the understanding of the crucial role of cultural representation in an individual’s or a community’s self-image and sense of agency.

Without undermining the importance of the cultural, it is good to remind ourselves of the nature of this field of representation, whether in popular culture, literature, visual art or film. Rather than presenting the “truth” of “who we really are,” for Stuart Hall,
"popular culture is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented" (Hall, 1991: 32). Chicano cultural practices provide the opportunity for us to identify with stories and images of our lives so woefully "under-represented" in mainstream culture. Of course, the ways we imagine our lives together are not homogeneous. For example, both Luis Valdez’s play The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa (1964) and lesbian playwright Cherrie Moraga’s Heroes and Saints (1992) put on stage a character who is only a head. The two plays share an esthetic and a visual/verbal vocabulary, but galvanize them to strikingly different ends and effects.

As consumers of these images we may or may not accept the invitation to identify with them, but we are no longer innocent about the politics of these representations (Hall, 1988). The fantasy and love of “Chicanó” can exclude many who would be part of the collective. As bell hooks suggests, the emerging critical consciousness of diversity within ethnic communities, exemplified in many texts and images by Chicanas, will surely change the nature of the pleasure some are used to taking in our cultural representations, but it may enable us to have even greater pleasure in less exclusive imaginings of community.

As a “bi-racial,” middle-class, Chicana-identified lesbian academic, to name but a few of my subject positions, I am particularly interested in how Chicana/o studies participates in imagining “us” as a social group in ways that limit the participation of women and define “authentic” belonging in terms of a normative racial, class and sexual identity. Ethnic studies, women’s studies and queer theory have taught us valuable lessons about the power of the unmarked category. Just as whiteness constructs itself as the center and the norm in its very invisibility, an uninterrogated heterosexuality (defined coercively along the axes of monogamous marriage and procreative sex) stands as the universal of human sexuality, positioning homosexuality as the abject but necessary “outside” to a normative heterosexuality which seems to flow unproblematically from a binary notion of gender as active masculinity and passive femininity. Only by subjecting the categories of whiteness, masculinity and normative heterosexuality to constant scrutiny can the fiction of their monolithic power be decentered and fragmented: no longer the one and the same that defines itself in terms of its other but another among others.

The possibility of transforming the research agenda of Chicana/o studies for the twenty-first century means combating a kind of ghettoization within the discipline. The men continue to do pretty much what they always did, the women do gender analyses and the lesbians and (to a lesser extent) the gay men critique homophobia and heterosexism. What would Chicana/o studies look like if everybody did gender along with race and class, and if everybody took sexuality seriously as impacted by and impacting the way we experience ourselves as Chicana or Chico? What would it be like if we all interrogated our own dominant discourses on race: mestizaje, contemporary interracial relationships and the “coyote” offspring of white and Mexican unions? What if Chicano scholars routinely considered the role of gender in shaping the experience of immigration or labor? What if cultural critics, instead of tagging only homosexual identity, spoke of the textual construction of heterosexuality as well?

I propose to make the study of sexuality central to Chicana/o studies, using it to rethink the whole field rather than just “adding it in,” which would continue its marginalization. This proposal, that the analysis of sexuality can make us look at things differently, meets with various kinds of resistance, not the least of which is the thundering
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silence around issues of desire and sexuality in Chicana/o culture, particularly women's silence. While I feel that we have much to learn about ourselves by examining the cultural representation of what moves us sexually, the analysis of sexuality is not limited to who does what to whom in bed, but encompasses the analysis of desire as what moves us, period. By studying the sexual yearnings and practices expressed in our collective imaginings, we also learn about the links between sexual longing for the other and the ongoing search for and commitment to “community” that underlies the very construction of Chicana/o studies. In the study of culture, why do we not ask where and how we take our pleasure? The reluctance to speak of pleasure in what we do betrays the double whammy of puritanical Marxist and Indian Catholic legacies. Yet the realities we face as academics—the workaholism, the stress-related illnesses, the vicious circle that keeps the few doing the teaching, mentoring and committee work that should be done by a faculty of color twice or three times our size make it more important than ever to construct what we do in the university as pleasure and passion.

In her keynote address “Technologies of Desire,” presented to the 1995 National Association of Chicano Studies (NACS) conference plenary session, Emma Pérez spoke of desire as the prime mover of social change, with the power to disrupt repressive social machines as well as to transform us. For Pérez, we can hope to redress the negative results of repression within our political movements in the recognition of desire as an "open passion system" that empowers rather than seeks power over. Pérez poses key questions for our academic project: how is our desire for Chicana/o studies wrung out of us in the university, with the rationality of its "academic standards," and what happens to the passion that stems from our activism as scholars? It is no coincidence that Chicana lesbians have been at the forefront of this reclaiming of the revolutionary potential of desire in all its personal, collective and political ramifications.

The stakes in the theoretical expansion of Chicana/o studies as an academic discipline are particularly high for lesbians and gays of color, given the exclusionary politics of domination that have characterized the histories of both women's studies and American ethnic studies. Even today within this branch of ethnic studies, for example, debates have emerged concerning gender, but lesbian and gay issues continue to be marginalized. From other quarters, ongoing critiques (see, for example, the 1990 Anzaldúa anthology Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras) expose the ways discourses on difference have been appropriated by white feminists, addressing new forms of racism, and calling attention to the “inclusion without influence” of women of color in women’s studies programs and research (Uttil, 1990).

There are, of course, changes that merit our attention. In the last five years we have witnessed within our professional organization a shift away from the heterosexual male dominance of earlier times: namely, the increasing female and lesbian presence within NACS brought about by the refusal of Chicana lesbians and feminists to remain silent and invisible. Yet even with these developments heterosexual women of color, including Chicanas, can often see clearly their multiple marginalization in terms of race, gender and class origins, yet can remain unconscious of their heterosexual privilege. Heterosexual males of color, including Chicanos, often privilege race and class over gender and sex, thus obscuring heterosexual male dominance and sexual privilege.

The need for an analysis of multiple oppressions and multiple privileges in racial/ethnic identity is greater than ever, in order to help channel the energies of cultural nationalism along paths that diverge from invisibility, misogyny and homophobia. But
one of the problems we face in developing the theoretical paradigm for Chicana/o studies I have been outlining is overcoming the very academic training that taught us to focus on one or two issues as if they exist separately from the others, whether it be gender, race, class or sexuality. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the rigid separation of these categories in our analyses reveals a general resistance to acknowledging the ways one experiences racial and cultural identity inseparably from gender and sexual constructions of the self (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1995: 127).

The solution to this problem is not one of inclusion "after the fact." The "additive" model of "including" previously excluded categories maintains power in the hands of those who constitute the "norm," graciously inviting the different in," and inhibits an understanding of the relations among the elements of identity and the effect each has on the others (Spelman, 1988: 115; Uttal, 1990; Yarbro-Bejarano, 1995: 127). The critique of the additive model has been accompanied by an awareness of the necessity of producing a relational theory of difference, examining the formation of identity in the dynamic interpenetration of gender, race, sexuality, class and nation (Mohanty, 1991: 2; Yarbro-Bejarano, 1995: 128). The theory is also relational within each binary set, for example, a man lives his masculinity through his cultural, sexual and class identifications, but also in relation to a certain construction of femininity which for the man is essential to his manhood.

Critics who endeavor to replace ways of thinking with new ones are faced with a profound "conceptual and theoretical difficulty" (Gordon, 1991: 101–2). What is needed is a new paradigm in Chicana/o studies that permits the expansion of analytic categories in such a way as to give "expression to the lived experience of the ways race, class, sexuality and gender converge" (Childers and hooks, 1990; Yarbro-Bejarano, 1995: 128).

Given current intellectual developments, it would be regressive to consider the experiences of lesbians and gays of color as "different" or to merely include them under the auspices of this area of studies: "[t]he fluidity and heterogeneity of forms of sexual identity (exemplified in the emergence of the category of queerness) speak for possibilities of analysis far beyond a mere gay/straight dichotomy." In a similar way, new conceptions of ethnicity in cultural studies incorporate a "recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subject positions, social experiences and cultural identities" which comprise the categories Chicana/o, black and people of color (Hall, 1988). One result of this shift in thinking about identity is "the blurring of boundaries" among formerly rigid and separated analytic categories. This permits us to perceive what Katie King calls the "race of sex" and the "sex of race, for example" (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1995: 128).

A recently articulated position against the relational paradigm is that "everything cannot be done at the same time and fitted into a single, comprehensive theory" (de Lauretis, 1991: 270), or even that such projects suggest an "epistemological imperialism" (Butler, 1993: 18), arrogant in its dilettantish claim to such expansive authority in so many areas. This objection raises important questions about the production of Chicana/o studies theory, and theory in general. What assumptions underlie the perception that the introduction of some issues somehow interrupts or defers the discussion of others? By choosing to focus on one or two elements, usually relegating the others to a footnote with the appropriate bibliography, do we provisionally and tactically privilege one or two categories in the hopes that the analysis thus produced would be useful to others' own projects involving other categories? Does the relegation of the pursuit of a particular power vector, such as race or gender, to those for whom it is the "central
focus of one's work" reinforce the artificial boundaries among analytic categories? Should the analysis of sexuality or gender, for example, be confined to those texts or practices that foreground them in particular ways? These questions and the very linguistic difficulties involved in trying to articulate the terminology of the relational paradigm demonstrate the limitations of our current theories for broaching the interdefining of multiple structures of domination in cultural identities, or even for formulating certain kinds of questions and not others.

While the critiques of people of color are crucial in this project of theoretical expansion, "everyone's sex has a race and vice versa, just as everyone's gender identity is constructed in the interplay among race, class, sexuality and nation" (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1995: 130). No one becomes who they are in relation to only one social category (Alarcón, 1990), and no representation of sexuality or desire is free of racialization (even in the absence of people of color) (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1995).

I suggest that the writing and theory of many Chicanas have laid the ground for a new paradigm of multiple and shifting identities, consciousness and political agency that can form the theoretical framework of Chicana/o studies for the future.7 Chicana/o studies can be an ideal site for contesting rather than reproducing hegemonic scripts such as male or white supremacy, upper-class superiority or compulsory heterosexuality. We can produce counter-hegemonic guidelines for scholarship and activism by problematizing the construction of a single, linear development of either Chicana/o identity or Chicana/o political movement. An important piece of this project is recognizing and interrogating the heterogeneity of racial and sexual identities. For the 1990s, and into the twenty-first century, we could work with the terms "Chicana" or "Chicano" as dynamic processes rather than a fixed and homogeneous identity.

There is reason to be hopeful that the recent history of debate around exclusionary practices will reorient the research agendas of Chicana/o studies in the awareness of the ways both our social formation and ourselves as subjects are structured in and through the overlapping experience of race, class, sexuality, culture and gender. Yet in spite of our best efforts, the outcome will be affected by institutional constraints that determine the availability of resources and radically restrict the possibility of training, hiring and retaining Chicana/o studies scholars whose work involves such analysis. This returns me to the point where I began.

As we move into the twenty-first century, Chicana/o studies must retain an allegiance to contestation and resistance against all forms of domination in the US, while working with the terms "Chicana" and "Chicano" as constantly producing identities (rather than as fixed and immutable categories) and as engaging productive tensions that are vital to continued projects of theoretical expansion. No doubt there are those who would question the fact that these sites of social, political and cultural struggle continue to be important from the point of view of intellectual or political practice. Unfortunately, even within the progressive sector we find scholars who are not able to discern new complex movements and identity formations and theoretical positionings within institutionally marginalized disciplines that "speak" embattled social identities.

Those of us who work in cultural studies and seek to interrogate power relations need to further engage the issue of why these disciplines continue to be invalidated and dismissed within institutions of higher education. We also need to examine how these institutions generate political subtexts and implicate particular social and political subjects in the process. Recent events have provided us with a case worth mentioning.
UC Regent Ward Connerly, who was behind the regents’ 1995 vote to ban race-based admissions and hiring as well as the passage of Proposition 209, which effectively abolished affirmative action in the State of California, announced his plans to review ethnic studies programs. This regent specifically “questioned the legitimacy of women’s studies, along with gay and lesbian studies or any discipline that probes issues of identity” (Chao, 1998). Significantly, Connerly also proposed a ban on separate graduation ceremonies, adding this justification for his position: “All of the infrastructure [of these programs] created back in the 1970s and the 80s as a result of the black nationalism and the black power movement, I think we need to re-examine it [the infrastructure] now” (Lempinen, 1998). As with the arguments in favor of Propositions 187, 209 and 227, Connerly offers a disconcerting example of how these area studies are demonized, essentialized and balkanized, and ultimately ill served by reductionist interpretations that ignore their specificity and critical internal engagements and developments. Given the way certain area studies continue to be imbricated in the social and political predicaments of a population which has not shed its marginal status, and given the recent policies of a state (California) that has reversed the clock of progress on multiple fronts, it is important that we not only encourage but also practice a different disciplinary representation and evaluation. Now more than ever the stakes in doing so are very high.

Notes
1 This is a slightly revised version of the talk I presented at the plenary session of the 1994 regional NACS Conference in Santa Cruz.
2 I have made this point and the subsequent point in reference to another related context in my essay, “Expanding the categories of race and sexuality in lesbian and gay studies,” in Professions of Desire, George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman (eds) (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995) in reference to another related context:

   Many lesbians and gays of color remained on the fringe of 60s and 70s feminist and civil rights struggles or paid the high price of alienation, ostracization and closeting for doing political work which demanded the privileging of race, gender or class over sexual identity.


While sexual identity prohibited feeling completely “at home” in racially based social movements, the cultural and class experiences of lesbians of color led to a far-reaching critique of categories such as “women” that universalized white middle-class women’s experience (Saalfield and Navarro, 1991: 124).

This referenced information, along with some of the referenced and quoted information concerning the difficulties associated with the production of a theory of relational difference, are from my essay, “Expanding the categories,” pp. 124–35. This material has been reprinted by permission of the Modern Language Association, although it is reframed and often re-elaborated within a Chicana/o context here.

3 I have also pointed out that Chicanas have had to fight for women-only spaces within the institutional structure of NACS, yet by the 1992 Conference in March, the schedule
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Lce- included a lesbian caucus meeting, a lesbian round table and a lesbian panel. Gay Chicanos, who had been less vocal over the past two decades compared to Chicana

4 Some of the referenced and quoted information that appears on this page and the following is from my essay, “Expanding the categories of race and sexuality in lesbian and gay studies” (1995: 127–8).

6 This debate has moved us from us/them dichotomy underpinning a unitary notion of identity and experience to a recognition of the constructed, political character of terms such as “Chicano,” and “black” or “people of color.” For a more in-depth discussion of queer identities, see Professions $Desire, pp. 126–7.

8 Connerly also questioned the “educational value” of these programs and, in addition, he proposed that “many courses and departments in African American, Latino and Asian studies may promote racial divisions rather than racial integration” (see Lempinen, 1998).

References


Introduction

I AM DEEPLY HONORED TO have this opportunity to address the NACCS membership. I must admit when I was invited to give one of the keynotes I thought NACCS must have made some mistake, or they needed to make a clarification. Surely, when they asked me if I would accept my nomination to give one of the keynotes, they did not mean the keynote, the general plenary. They must have meant the student plenary, right? Like you, I also wondered why a graduate student was going to stand up here and address the members of NACCS. I was told that the coordinating committee wanted to do something new this year: they wanted an established scholar and they wanted a young and emerging scholar.

Well, I thought, "emerging" is an appropriate word, and San Antonio is as appropriate a city to "emerge" in. You see, my first NACCS conference was the 1992 conference, seven years ago, held right here in San Antonio. I came with the UT Austin MEChA chapter. I was twenty years old then and had just become a member of that rather odd MEChA chapter. And I say odd because at the MEChA national conferences I attended in later years I found out that not all MEChA chapters fully embraced feminist and queer struggles—all with a Marxist bent—as central to their mission.

My fellow Mechistas Sandy Soto and Debbie Vargas had gotten me all worked up about the possibility of meeting other gay Chicanos. They had told me about the recently created Lesbian Caucus that they were a part of. And there was also a Marijuanero Caucus. But I later found out that was just a rumor.

As soon as I got to the conference I leafed through the program and was shocked to see that there was no mention whatsoever of a Gay Caucus. Now I know I wasn’t the only queen at the conference. Anyone could just look around the hotel lobby to know the conference was full of them. So quietly, I put up a note on the public bulletin board that said: “where are all the Chicano jotos?” and announced an informal meeting.
There were only a handful of us at that meeting. But we decided to informally create the National Association of Latino Gay Academics and Activists, or NALGAA. Dennis Medina, from UT Austin, suggested the acronym. NALGA had actually been the original acronym for another organization which would later become the National Latina and Latino Lesbian and Gay Organization, or LLEGO.

We were a small group, but we grew. The following year at the 1993 San Jose conference we officially became a caucus. But NACCS seemed hesitant and uneasy about having a caucus with the name of NALGA (what were we? a chapter of the national association within NACCS or a caucus?). So we changed the name, but decided to keep the edge by renaming it the Joto Caucus.

So to call me an "emerging" scholar is appropriate. I’ve come out along with NACCS. In fact, my public emergence in NACCS has been a sort of coming out process. The first panel I ever participated on was as a drag queen on the Chicana lesbian fashion show panel at the 1993 San Jose conference. And the first time I addressed the general audience at an NACCS conference I was actually in full drag (in fact the only times I have ever done drag has been at NACCS conferences). It’s no surprise, then, that NACCS and Chicano Studies are completely inseparable from my jotoness and my (limited) emergence as a drag queen.

The personal is political

That’s a brief history of how I became involved in and committed to NACCS, but on to my talk. Instead of providing some heady, academic, abstract talk, I want to provide a more personal explanation of what Chicana and Chicano Studies means to me. I’ll have plenty of time in my dissertation and academic career to write more formal, disciplinary based, and theoretical discussions of Chicano masculinity, sexuality, and colonialism. Today I want to take this opportunity to share with you some of my personal and private ruminations on Chicano gay men and masculinity.

For several years, I have wanted to unravel the convoluted knot of Chicano masculinity, queer male desire, race, and power. At the core of this personal, intellectual, and political search has been my yearning to understand myself, my desires, my place within my family, and my community. It’s been an attempt to continue the artistic, political, intellectual, personal work that I have come to admire so much from women of color. It’s been fueled by my frustration in our (that is, men of color) deafening silence to the feminist critique of masculinist Chicano politics; fueled by the absence of Chicano queer male cultural critique; by the colonized mentality that I see within "searches" for queer Chicanos/Mexicanos; by the need to document the fact that I—we—exist, to write something down that I can return to, to read something that reminds me that I exist, that provides a glimpse at how I have come to be the man that I am. I write to make sense of it all.

MEChA at UT Austin taught me that Chicana and Chicano Studies could and should be the place where I could delve into these questions. Chicano Studies was praxis. It was a method and practice. It was a place of constant struggle, of engaging in immanent critique, always envisioning a better future while critically studying our own activism for what we left out, what was left unaccounted for. MEChA at UT Austin, through our activism, reading groups, and carne asadas taught me that Chicana and Chicano Studies had to always keep pleasure and politics in balance.
Looking back on those years of MEChA I think that our Tejano nationalism was perhaps a form of dialectical materialism, a compensation for the history of racism and denigration of Tejano culture. In my opinion, Chicano Studies is eclectic, drawing from theories that may provide light on our history, reveal the insidious ways in which oppression is transmitted among and between us, or establish similarities between the conquest and colonization of Chicanos and other peoples in an increasingly globalizing, transnational world.

In many different ways, I can say that I’ve been searching for Chicano gay men since that 1992 San Antonio conference. But I’ve realized that focusing our political energy, our emotional strength, our hopes and visions for a better future by relying on the development of a gay identity will not answer the questions that I’m interested in. What we jotos, gay, bisexual Chicanos call ourselves does not matter as much as what it means to us during those intimate sexual encounters, in the heat of violent passion, during those vulnerable moments where our well-trained politically correct narrative gives way to the underlying sexual, gender, racial ideologies. What I need to know is what it means to call ourselves gay Chicanos, queer, bisexual, whatever term we want to use. How do our pleasures and desires come to rest so intimately with the inseparableness of sexuality and gender in a supposedly stable gay identity? We need to question the colonizing tendencies of an international lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, fill in the blank order. The truth of the matter is that our particular configuration of desire (sexual and emotional) is so implicated in specific, local histories of race, gender, and power. And this history itself is imbedded in a cultural, social, political, and economic history as well.

Somewhere, along the early road of the queer liberation movement that started in the 1970s, we lost our vision. What started out as a desire to create radical social, cultural, and for some economic change, has become a liberal chant for identity rights. No, I don’t fool myself into thinking that we have achieved anything as basic as equal rights, but the ability to claim a sexual identity, alone, is not enough. This may be a dangerous claim to make, especially at a time in which our rights are so vulnerable. Especially when retrograde, right-wing Chicano nationalists insist on our exile, as if we—the queer, the joteria—haven’t been here all along. But I say this because I have become so frustrated by our (gay men) lack of exploring the intimate connections between masculinity, race, and desire. What good does claiming an identity do, if it serves to ignore the anxieties of masculinity, if it elides the gender power struggles between Chicanos queer men, if it does little to unite the feminist critique with the queer liberation critique?

For me Chicano Studies is a place where I can ask these deeply personal questions and leave with an answer that locates the personal within its specific social and historical framework. It’s a site where one can return to the wound in order to heal, as Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has commented on Cherrie Moraga’s plays. In my academic work I focus on the nineteenth century and the juridical emergence of Mexican Americans. By studying and recovering literature written by US Mexicans in the nineteenth century we can gain access to their subjective responses to the history of conquest and colonialism. My goal is to historicize the relationship between race, gender, sexuality, and colonialism. Eventually I want to establish a relationship between the nineteenth century and the emergence of Chicano gay identity in the late twentieth century. But this academic work is also an attempt to understand myself, my family, and my community. Now I want to share my more personal reckoning with Chicano masculinity and queer desire. If I’ve learned one thing from my mom and her Al-Anon meetings it’s that healing
and growth can come from sharing our stories with each other. Much of Chicana and Chicano literature is a testament to this psychological and social healing process.

Sex

Growing up and coming of age sexually in Oak Cliff, a Mexican barrio in Dallas, I knew that I had to understand how women experienced sexism. No, I never thought this consciously. I felt it in my soul. I felt it and knew it from the first time I had sex with a guy at 14. I remember those desperate adolescent years, those anxiety ridden years I spent making sure no one saw any sign of my queerness. The seed was planted then, and it’s not until I went to UT Austin that I thought it for the first time: understanding female/gender oppression would somehow lead to my salvation.

I knew it from the way my first male lover treated me at the age of 14. He’d tell me stories about the plenty of sex he had with girls as we’d engage in foreplay. He’d always tell me these tales. And while he may have told them to me to appease his internalized homophobia, it also served to remind me that I too was an object, just like the girls he screwed in those stories he told me. So animal-like were his descriptions, I remember: in the desert, outside, by bus stops. Always in a hurry, always without a sense of emotional or sensual attachment. And he did the same to me. The association was made then. I was like those girls. No, not a girl, but he did to me what he did to those girls, and he treated me like the girls in those stories: as a mere vehicle for his own desire and pleasure. I sensed that I was less of a man than him and more like the girls of his stories. We never had an egalitarian relationship. He constantly teased me, called me a faggot, and threatened to tell all of our friends what he did to me. What I allowed him to do to me. I knew then that I may have looked like him, like a boy, but in my heart and in my soul I sensed I also had something in common with girls. It is these memories, these associations that I want to recall. It is this tumultuous, exhilarating, and depressing year of sex that I want to finally give words to.

On weekends during the muggy, sweaty summer of 1986, I’d wait for my sisters y mami to leave the house. The car was barely out of the driveway before I’d call José. In our year of sex, we rarely talked about it. We pretended nothing was going to happen. Funny, we both knew what we wanted, but never said a word about it. Only our actions would tell.

For me, sex was inseparable from my fear of being found out. The more I wanted it, the more I got it, the more I feared that people would read me, and see what I had done the weekend before in the alleys, on the school rooftop, in my own house.

Walks down hallways in high school became anxiety-ridden, I became paranoid of the way I walked. Could people tell that I had gotten screwed? Had my body begun to transform into something so queer that I could be ID’d at a glance? I spent hours in the shower, scrubbing those sex smells off of my teenage body, terrified that someone would smell me out.

As soon as José told me he’d be over, I ran to my room, closed the windows, pulled the curtains, locked the doors, and turned up the radio. I shut off my room from the rest of the house and from the window-unit air-conditioner. Within seconds, I could feel the August humidity begin to hang heavy in the room. My blood pumped faster, my heart started racing. I knew no one was home, but I was desperate to make sure nothing messed up our time together.
I'd pull out the Othello game board and put on the Bangles. I'd crank it up to drown out the rest of the world. Lying on the bed, we'd start playing, pretending we were interested in the game. After five minutes, the action would start.

The movements were barely detectable. You'd take off your shoes. You were always so in control. You were a real fourteen-year-old man with a body that everyone noticed had grown a little faster than average. Your voice was deep, your body powerful, your attitude tough and confident. Your hurried walk in the humid heat had concocted a pungent scent. I could smell you. And you'd be mine for the next hour. Next to me, I'd let you take me, do what you wanted to me, as long as I could claim you. As long as I could feel you.

Move by move, we got closer. First, our hands started to brush up against each other. Our feet touched. The heat built up in that airtight room. Sweat collected on my brow, our clothes became drenched, the heat intensified, and I no longer knew if it was because I wanted you so desperately or because of the residues of the dying Saturday afternoon heat. Knowing that any spoken word would betray your maleness, your straightness, you preferred to communicate by gestures. I knew better than to say what I wanted you to do. So I bit my lip, sweat hanging off my brow, as my hand came to rest near your thigh.

In the background, I could hear the Bangles, “It's just another Manic Monday.”

The smells in the room became my incense. Your musky scent, the salty stench of sweat. I cherish these smells. I refused to wash my sheets. Your odor infused them. I was desperate to keep any memory of you. A piece of clothing, your Boy Scout shirt that I borrowed and never returned, your maroon briefs—the first colored briefs I ever saw, the dirty pair of socks you left one time: I'd keep them all. Years later, I'd yearn for those smells.

I desired your strength. I wanted you to control me, dominate, and overpower me. In doing that, I'd get into you, below the layers of your arrogance, of your power to humiliate. For that one moment, I'd feel your softness, see your vulnerability, give you pleasure. But you'd always remind me that you were a man. You refused to kiss me, whispered faggot in my ear when we were with the guys. And it worked. I was always afraid of you. I wanted you, but I was terrified to make the first move. But that was all I needed: a hint. Only give the sign, José, and I would be healed.

Once a week I could count on having you. On you teaching me about my body, becoming familiar with the pain and pleasures that sprung from your fingers tracing my teenage body.

I'd learn to share you with the stories you'd tell me about all the girls you had had that week: with your cousin in the deserts of west Texas, with a girl in the bushes by the bus stop, at your friend's house party. You probably lied to me; I told myself. To make yourself feel better for having sex with a guy. I'd still get jealous, and you knew it. But you'd proceed anyway and tell me the details of sex with girls. In the end, however, I'd have you, hold you, claim you. You may have had your girlfriends, but how many of them had you been with for a year?

In the back of my mind, I wondered what could've happened if you publicly claimed our relationship. In the back of my mind, I imagined you bragging about doing me like you bragged about the girls.

“You're my ho’,” you told me once. You could have me or any girl whenever you wanted. That was true, I was at your mercy. I was constantly begging for sex, so
you told me, an insatiable desire to be close to men. A desire that has not diminished in the least in the past 13 years. You teased me, flirted with me. During our countless phone conversations, you’d inevitably allude to it. Make me beg for it. And I did. You could have anyone, you convinced me. I could have only you, I told myself.

You taunted me, telling me that you’d have to start charging me because I wanted it so bad. You didn’t expect it, but I told you to go to hell. That I had had enough of you. That sex with you was not worth the hell you put me through. But a week later, it was you who came back for me. It was you who could not stay away.

Once, after one of our sweat-drenched summer sessions, as I put on my dirty socks, I watched you get dressed. I saw you leave me. Sitting at the edge of the bed naked except for the socks, I stared beyond you, I wondered where this would lead. When we would be able to be together.

I dreamt a beautiful dream of us leaving Oak Cliff, of moving somewhere together and living as man and wife. You would work in construction like the men in your family, and I’d study like I always had. But that fantasy quickly came to an end. You turned around and caught me daydreaming.

And you changed. The José I had for that hour each week would inevitably change, become hostile, see me as that which you despised in yourself.

“Raúl, are you gay?” you asked me, seeming to condemn me without needing an answer.

I wasn’t prepared, José, don’t you see? I didn’t know what to say. You already had too much power over my life, and I could not give you any more. On weekends, with our friends, I’d become the object of derision: the one who studied too much, the one who didn’t know how to play football, the one who didn’t sniff talleewa, the sensitive mama’s boy, I was the nerd of the group. I’d stare at you as you fell in with the guys, flinching each time your flared tongue spat out an attack. I’d wait for the day that you’d use the final weapon against me, wait until you sold me out, wait until you told the world the truth about me, that I was a joto, a faggot, a maricon, that I got screwed, and not only once, and even loved it. I held back, José. I had to. I became afraid that this too would become your weapon. I knew I was queer, José. I knew that I cherished your smell after playing football, that I loved the way you gently inflicted pain and pleasure on my body, that I could pleasure you as well. So I couldn’t give you that ammunition. I loved you so much I thought, but I just couldn’t give in to the possibility of you using it against me. So I lied to you: I told you I wasn’t. It came out more as a question than as an affirmation. In that long year we were together, José, this is as close as we got to talking about what we did.

“Are you gay, Raúl?”

But I wasn’t willing to let go of the moment, to let it pass. I took a chance, and I asked you, whispered it I think, “No, are you?”

I thought you hadn’t heard me. You pulled on your tank top, turned around, and as you started to walk out, I think I heard you murmur: “No, I’m not.”

Conclusion: what Chicana/o Studies means to me

It’s been 13 years since that year of torturous love. And I still find myself returning to that year, trying to understand my relationship with José, wanting to figure out the
I've shared this personal narrative with you because for me my relationship with José is what, in part, has driven so much of my academic, political, and emotional work. To me, that relationship is a dense nexus in which questions of masculinity, sexuality, gender, and power collapse so easily onto one another, making it almost impossible to distinguish between them. One thing that I have learned is that the question of queer sexuality and gay sexual identity among Chicanos must not be taken for granted. José, as far as I know, does not identify as gay, and yet towards the end of our relationship there was a glimmer of emotional attachment. That's why, for me, the politics over what we should call ourselves is so limiting. What is more important to me is how we, as Chicano men with queer sexual and emotional desires, have reconciled our desires with male privilege and power. What is more important to me is a historical understanding of our sexuality. How have the overlapping histories of conquests and colonialisms, of the transformation from rancho economies to full-blown transnational capitalism impacted our sense of self? How have the histories of male dominance, mestizajes, feminisms, and sexual liberation movements impacted our identity, our ethics, our particular configuration of sexuality, race, gender, and class?

Chicana and Chicano Studies, and more specifically Chicana feminism, has created a space and the language to explore this aspect of Chicano culture. What I've learned from Chicana lesbian writings is that meaningful social and cultural change is impossible without understanding our inner psyche, without understanding how sometimes the ones we love the most are the ones we hurt the most. They've demonstrated that without understanding the relationship between pleasure and politics the change we yearn for will continually be deferred. For me, the question of personal and emotional healing, of pleasure and desire is inseparable from social and cultural activism, from organized politics, and social critique. Chicanas have developed a space and critical framework from which we can bridge the personal and the political. Now, I believe, it is time for men to explore how we have become the men that we are, how our relationships with the men in our family have shaped and formed our sense of masculinity, how our sexual and emotional desires impact and are shaped by other aspects of our identity. One way we, as men, can begin to engage in this dialogue may be by returning to our own sense of loss during our formative years. As Cherrie Moraga wrote in Loving in the War Years:

Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place. . . . [In order for [men] to create an authentic alliance with [women], [men] must deal with the primary source of [their] own sense of oppression.]

Only by uniting a personal and emotional introspection of our pain, pleasure, and loss with a historical, social, and political analysis can we begin to create truly global and transformative change.

Thank you very much for your attention.
Note

1. This chapter was originally an unpublished NACCS (National Association for Chicana Chicano Studies) Keynote Speech dated Thursday, April 29, 1999.