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OF INDIANS AND MODERNITY IN GLORIA ANZALDÚA'S *BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA* THE NEW MESTIZA

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Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

Let us hope that the left hand, that of darkness, of femaleness, of 'primitiveness', can divert the indifferent, right-handed, 'rational' suicidal drive that, unchecked, could blow us into acid rain in a fraction of a millisecond.

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

In this essay, I suggest that the work of Chicana lesbian feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa, especially in her 1987 *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*, belongs to a long-standing history of Latin American as well as United States Chicano conversations about race, sexuality, and modernity. Her late 20th century Chicana lesbian-feminist viewpoint is often read as the antithesis of a modernist viewpoint, and indeed it provides a lens through which modernist ideas are refracted. Yet much of the language she uses to appeal to the fusion or 'hybridity' of (racial) opposites and her portrayal of 'the Indian woman in us' (1987: 22), are found in Mexican discourses of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* in the early 20th century as well as, later, in Chicana(o) appropriations of the same conversations from the mid-1960s through the end of the 1970s.¹ These are discourses which are modernist at their heart, not as an aesthetic category but as a socio-

¹ *Indigenismo* was often the other side of *mestizaje* for countries such as Mexico and Peru with large surviving indigenous populations. Indigenists were never, until much more recently, Indians themselves; *indigenismo* denoted a sense of sympathy with the plight of the conquered Indian, but also constructed 'the Indian' as sad, oppressed, and melancholic; the Indian was either 'asleep' or so downtrodden as to be almost constitutionally degenerate (Knight 1990: 71–113). As Nancy Stepan notes, *indigenismo* 'led to anthropological and sociological studies of the Indians ... and to a romanticized celebration of their roles' in Mexico's culture (1996:146). Most importantly, ancient indigenous cultures were seen as the foundation for a modern national history, while contemporary indigenous peoples were viewed as culturally and often racially (evolutionarily) degenerate. *Indigenismo* took on specific political 'flavors' depending on where it was being deployed.



-historical one which founds its worldview on the assumption of conceptual differences between 'modern' and 'primitive.' Anzaldúa's invocation, in *Borderlands*, of the Mexican politician and thinker José Vasconcelos' 1926 *La raza cósmica* (*The Cosmic Race*) should alert us to the place of her work in the history of modernist thinking about race and sex in the Americas, particularly in Mexico.

Some scholars assume that Anzaldúa's use in *Borderlands* of terms such as 'hybridity' came from a familiarity with the theoretical language of post-colonial critics. However, Anzaldúa herself noted in a 1996 interview with Andrea Lunsford that such acquaintance as she had with this language did not come until much later, after she had first published *Borderlands*:

I didn't even know I belonged in this postcolonial thing until Patricia Clough said in a bookflap that I'm a feminist postcolonial critic ... In preparation for this interview, one of your questions was 'Who has influenced you as a postcolonial critic?' I couldn't think of anyone ... When Homi Bhabha was here I ... went to his lecture, which I didn't understand. I took a class with Donna Haraway in feminist theory and when I had to read [Spivak] ... it took me a long time to decipher her ... But I didn't have time to study a lot, so I made little notes about the things I wanted to think about. (2000: 255)

Rather than coming from postcolonial theory (although some of the racist ideas of European colonial powers were also influential in Latin America), the conceptual scaffolding for *Borderlands* was both directly and indirectly inherited from modernist Mexican thought, when discourses of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* were employed in building modern national futures on ancient indigenous pasts. Such projects were modernist in that they assumed fundamental differences between 'modern' and indigenous people: modern people were rational, scientific, light-skinned, and future-oriented, while indigenous peoples were the opposite: primitive, dark, and timeless, with an ancient spirituality.

Because 'modernism' can mean different things for different fields of study, I will restrict its definition considerably to mean a constellation of assumptions gaining prominence in the last half of the 19th century, undergirding progressivist ideas about modernity, modernization and nation. On both sides of the Mexico-United States border, the social sciences in particular popularized the notion that the indigenous heritage of Mexico was timeless and unmodern in nature, functioning best as the foundation for the nation's move into a modern future. This notion reached its cultural peak in the first decades of the 20th century, and the cultural nationalism of certain threads of Chicano *movimiento* in the 1960s and 70s drew heavily on such Mexican-inspired ideas about Indians. In this essay, I argue that the appearance of discourses of *mestizaje* and indigenism in Anzaldúa's work in the late 1980s does not necessarily mean, as many critics have assumed, that they have been reconceived or refigured as postmodern. Instead, I unlink 'modernism' from a rigid periodization in which modernism ends at certain time so that postmodernism may begin, and read it as an ongoing conceptual framework in American discourses of race and sexuality. In this way we can begin to trace a transnational genealogy—one with many layers, doublings, twists, and turns—of modernist ideas about race and sexuality from the beginning of the 20th century in Latin America through the last decades of the century in the United States.

Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar <http://muse.uq.edu.au/journals/modernism-modernity/v013/13.friedman.html>—FOOT3, discussing what he calls the contemporary 'alternative modernities' of non-Western countries, maintains that

To think in terms of "alternative modernities" is to admit that modernity is inescapable and to desist from speculations about the end of modernity ... to announce the general end of modernity even as an epoch, much less as an attitude or an ethos, seems premature, if not patently ethnocentric, at a time when non-Western people everywhere begin to engage critically their own hybrid modernities (2001: 1, 14).

Although he uses the term 'modernity', I find his comments useful in thinking about a specifically Chicana critical engagement with long-standing modernist conceptual frameworks. Anzaldúa's work has most often been characterized as postmodern in part, I believe, because her work seems to resist hegemonic narratives of modernity. Indeed modernism is usually understood to privilege the modern subject over the primitive or traditional one. Thus narratives or representations which favor the primitive or traditional subject over the modern often intend to resist hegemonic discourses of modernity and progress. Yet, as we will see, the very assumption itself of such a binary locates such narratives within, rather than without, of a modernist conceptual framework.

Understanding the contradictory impulses of *mestizaje*—its seeming antiracist attitude toward racial mixing, based on racist notions of indigenous degeneration; its appeal to hybridity and the progress of modernity, based on assumptions about the unchangeable and even static nature of the 'primitive'—is important. It helps us understand Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* in the context of a history of sensibilities about indigenous peoples, and about the function of *mestizaje*, shared throughout the century by many Mexicans and, later, by many Chicanos. Indeed, it is within, rather than beyond, the structuring assumptions of Latin American and Chicano modernist ideas about race and sexuality that Anzaldúa's anti-technological, liberatory, lesbian-feminist *mestiza* subject begins.

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa explained the history of *mestizo* Chicanos(as) by asserting that those who were 'genetically equipped to survive' Old World diseases 'founded a new hybrid race' (1987: 5). Beginning the chapter *La conciencia de la mestiza* (The consciousness of the *mestiza*), it becomes clear that Anzaldúa has inherited the terminology and imagery of a long Latin American discourse of racialized genetics:

At the confluence of two or more *genetic* streams, with chromosomes constantly 'crossing over', this mixture of races ... provides *hybrid progeny*, a mutable, malleable species with a *rich gene pool*. From this *racial*, ideological, cultural and *biological cross-pollenization*, an "alien" consciousness is in the making (77; my emphasis).

Terms such as *mestiza*, 'hybrid', 'cross-pollenization', and 'fusion' came to Anzaldúa via the Chicano appropriation of a particularly Mexican racialism, itself deeply invested in ways that gender and sexuality could be controlled to produce a eugenically healthy nation. Anzaldúa's insistence on the material aspects of the body—its sexuality and race—undoubtedly made modernist language and imagery, itself deeply



concerned with bodies, their sexuality, and their racial heritages, as attractive to her as they were to Chicano activists.

Yet even more importantly, the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the language of modernist Mexican racial theories were in part why that language appealed to Anzaldúa. As Robert Young notes, the various ideas of racial hybridity, at the heart of what he calls racial theory's 'most sinister, offensive move,' also map out 'the prospect of the evanescence of "race" as such ... [this is] its most anxious, vulnerable site' (1995: 19). As we will see, the very nature of the terms of *mestizaje*, as they operated in Mexico and during the Chicano *movimiento*, slipped constantly between racialized and cultural readings of difference and unification; the fulcrum of such readings was the question of the nature of 'race' and an indigenous heritage—was such a heritage cultural, biological, or both? But this very slipperiness, or plasticity, meant that racial theory could be (mis)read positively. Important Latin American figures such as the (closeted) lesbian Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, for example, worked for Vasconcelos in Mexico; and despite her public stance as the 'schoolteacher of the Americas,' Mistral performed her own queering of modernist Mexican and Latin American racial theories, particularly in her poetry, where she reframed a mix of indigenism and *mestizaje* as sensual and woman-centered. In this sense, too, Anzaldúa takes the opportunities offered by the contradictory assumptions of modernist racial theory in Mexico, opening a positive, if ambivalent, space for thinking race as well as sexuality differently. It is this ambivalence in Anzaldúa's use of modernist ideas which interests me; tracing a transnational genealogy of conversations about race and sexuality through 20th century Mexican and Chicana(o) thought shows us the ways Anzaldúa queered these conversations while never fully escaping from their governing conceptual boundaries. Knowing this, it is easier to understand the slippage between biological, sexual, and social fusion in *Borderlands*, and to comprehend the persistence with which Anzaldúa uses a lexicon of evolution, animal, and plant sciences throughout this text.

In what follows, I will briefly discuss Mexican constructions of *mestizaje* and indigenism in the first decades of the 20th century, and their relationship with modernist nationalism, showing how these were inherited by the Chicano cultural nationalism of the 1960s through the 1970s. Discussing the ways *Borderlands* both uses and reframes its inheritance of this history also reveals how *Borderlands* has come to be decontextualized and ahistoricized in much scholarly writing. Finally, I show how *Borderland* is both invested in, but also queers, modernist Mexican and Chicano ideas about racial character and racial 'fusion.'

1. GRAFTING AND HYBRIDS

Just as it was in Europe and in the United States, by the 1920s the science of eugenics was deeply entrenched in Latin American thought. Yet in contradistinction to the United States and Europe, where eugenics discourses mandated against the miscegenation of modern (white) and unmodern or degenerate (black, Jewish) people, the makers of public policy in countries like Mexico privileged an alternative eugenics—that of race-mixing. Such a move was motivated not by antiracist sentiment but, at least in part, because so much of the population of Mexico was already clearly mixed,

with Indian and Spanish mixture making up the majority, and African, Indian, and Spanish a smaller part of the total. But to bring such mixing under control, and to map out the way to a eugenically healthy nation, Mexican intellectuals, writers, and public policy makers alike employed a lexicon of ideas and metaphors from theories of evolution and eugenics, as well as from the biological and agricultural sciences. Among the most often-used metaphors were those of hybridity and grafting; these terms combined Mendelian theories of mating and cross-breeding with Lamarckian notions about the inheritance of acquired characteristics. In this way, Mexicans sought to prove that the *mestizo* 'race' mixture of Indian and Spanish resulted not in degenerate specimens but in a vigorous, forward-looking population. In *La raza cósmica*, for example, Vasconcelos maintained that 'The truth is that vigor is renewed with graftings ... the soul itself looks for diversity in order to enrich the monotony of its own contents' (1997: 33).²

Even before Vasconcelos proposed a 'beneficial spiritual Mendelianism', the enormously influential Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio had been putting forward the idea of the fusion of the races, in his 1916 *Forjando patria* (Forging Fatherland). There, he asserted that it was time for Mexico to 'make rise from the ... anvil the new nation of blended bronze and iron' (1960: 5–6). In the 1920s, Gamio felt that state-sponsored education for Indians, and a state-sponsored anthropology to understand them, would help constitute the 'anvil' for such a national blending. In a talk given in 1926 he asserted that 'social contacts' between the races must be 'normalized and orientated authoritatively, a thing by all means desirable since it requires convergent racial, cultural, and spiritual fusion' (1926:1 27). For Gamio, this meant the death, for example, of Indian languages, an event not only natural but 'beneficial to national unification' (127). But—and here is an important crux of the belief that the ancient needed to be brought into contact with the modern—'because these languages and dialects are the only path to the Indian's soul, we need some understanding of them' (126):

... the Ford, the sewing machine, the phonograph come heralding the modern civilization and penetrate to the most remote Indian villages. It is not enough, however, to provide the Indians with modern machinery; an understanding of their mental attitudes ... is essential to an effective substitution of the instruments and institutions of modern civilization, or to a fusion of the modern and the primitive. Unless a ... fusion takes place, industrial instruments will have no cultural dynamic influence. (Gamio 1926: 122)³

Such language, advocating as it does the death at the very least of Indian cultures and languages, sounds racist and conservative to the present-day ear; yet in Mexi-

²Vasconcelos later repudiated his championing of *mestizaje*. As Marilyn Miller notes, 'Almost immediately after the publication of *The Cosmic Race*, Vasconcelos began to backtrack and lose faith in the notion of Latin America as providentially *mestizo*' (2004: 40). Miller's work is an excellent overview of the history of *mestizaje* in Latin America.

³Manuel Gamio was one of the founders in 1911 of the Escuela Internacional de Arqueología y Etnología Americana (International School of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Americas), where he worked with Franz Boas; he was its director from 1916 to 1920, during which time he began to advocate *mestizaje* as a way of reuniting Mexico, especially in his 1916 *Forjando patria* (Forging Fatherland). Vasconcelos adopted some of his ideas from Gamio, as Gamio served as Director of Anthropology of the *Secretaría de Agricultura de México* (1917–24), and Sub-secretary of Public Education (1924–1925).



co eugenics, *mestizaje*, and indigenism were in fact associated with the revolutionary politics of the government, as well as with radical and socialist groups. As Alan Knight and Nancy Stepan both emphasize, a pro-Indian *indigenismo* was in fact a new and revolutionary stance for the Mexican government (Knight 1990: 77, Stepan 1991: 56). For Mexico as a state, virtually in tatters after the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution and attempting to encompass large groups of people who did not necessarily think of themselves as 'Mexican', the discourses of *mestizaje* and indigenism proved a remarkably long-lasting and potent source of usable tropes for the invocation of a forward-looking nation with a deep and ancient past.

Indians, however—real, live ones—remained a problem. While Mexico's reshaping as a modern nation demanded a sense of a deep indigenous past, contemporary Indians were another matter. The many different Indian groups living in Mexico did not feel a sense of *mexicanidad*, or 'Mexicanness' although some may have fought in the Revolution. Many Indians in fact had, according to anthropologists like Gamio, 'forgotten' their own ancient and folkloric traditions, and during the 1930s several efforts were made to re-teach Indians their own traditional dances and crafts (Becker 1995: 62). Many *indigenistas* felt that indigenous folkloric traditions needed to be saved, but that contemporary Indians themselves, who were at best culturally degenerate, must be educated, acculturated, and 'disappeared' into the larger *mestizo* fabric of *mexicanidad*. For the Indians, it was felt, oppression had virtually become a part of their racial heritage, rendering a racial character which was 'asleep', 'melancholy', 'quiet', never to awaken; contemporary Indians needed to disappear, *qua* Indians, into *mestizaje*, while the Indian's spiritual, racial, and cultural heritage lived on in the *mestizo* character and in the traditions of the nation. As we will see, these seeming contradictions in views about indigenous peoples which were embodied in the discourses of *mestizaje* and indigenism could serve either pro- or anti-technological, pro- or anti-Indian positions; but all these positions used the metaphors and images of hybridity—of mixing—for their own purposes.

2. THE NEW MESTIZA

One of the most basic contemporary United States critical assumptions about *mestizaje* is that the term and its use are inherently resistant to white racist supremacy. This is a historical misreading deriving in part from Chicano movement thought, and often reinforced in current discussions of *Borderlands*. In the early part of the century, Mexicans in particular did resent United States imperialism and its racism toward Mexicans, and took pains to say so; yet many Mexican elites and intellectuals privileged whiteness as well as North American technological know-how at the same time as they advocated a *mestizaje* that could theoretically resist the attitudes and agendas of white supremacy. Vasconcelos, for example, noted that 'we accept the superior ideas of the Whites but not their arrogance'; North Americans, 'having fulfilled their destiny of mechanizing the world, have set . . . the basis for a new period: the period of the fusion and mixing of all peoples' (1997: 25). Yet he, as most other Latin American intellectuals of the time, was convinced of the technological superiority of white people; he praised the 'clear mind' of North American whites (1997: 22) and maintained that 'Latin

America owes what it is to the white European, and is not going to deny him. To the North Americans themselves, Latin America owes a great part of her railroads, bridges, and enterprises' (25).

Anzaldúa herself clearly assumed, within the context of a late 20th century United States racial politics, that privileging *mestizaje* could be an antiracist move. In *Borderlands* then, Anzaldúa continued the Chicano *movimiento's* emphasis on *mestizaje* as inherently resistant. At the same time, this text's woman-centered, lesbian-feminist appropriation of *mestizaje* seemed to suggest a new and indeed queer way of going forward outside the restrictive boundaries of Chicano *carnalismo* (brotherhood, with an emphasis on the masculine) and identity politics. Thus, when it was published in 1987 by the feminist press Aunt Lute Books, *Borderlands'* antiracist, feminist, and lesbian orientation made it a remarkable book in the annals of masculinist Chicano cultural production, eclipsing in popularity Cherríe Moraga's earlier Chicana lesbian feminist work, the 1983 *Loving in the War Years*. The seeming 'newness' of *Borderlands'* treatment of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo*, heralded by its own subtitle *The New Mestiza*, has prompted many scholars to see this book as emblematic—indeed, iconic—of a kind of breaking-point within Chicano studies, marking a moment when Chicana thought and artistic production could no longer conveniently be ignored. Yet the book's very emphasis on *mestizaje* within a Chicana lesbian-feminist context has encouraged readings which disconnect it from the larger Latin American context in which it text belongs. Indeed, readings of racial mixture have been hailed as brand-new before; as Suzanne Bost notes,

Mixed-race Americans have long been credited with the capacity to blur the lines of racial differentiation. Historical studies and works of fiction from nineteenth-and early-twentieth-century America often celebrate mixture as a way to transcend racial division. Yet today this fluidity is described as 'new', as a sign of millennial or postmodern transformation to America's face (2003: 6).

This helps to explain why there are only a scant handful of scholars who have read *Borderlands* within a historiography of the Chicano *movimiento* of the 1960s and 70s,⁴ and even fewer within any extended discussion of Mexican modernist nationalism. Yet even those scholars who do make historical gestures toward a reading of *Borderlands* nevertheless insist that *Borderlands* itself is postmodern. Since postmodernism itself is read, in these essays, as conceptually and historically situated outside or after modernism,⁵ this text is plucked out of history to stand as 'new' or 'post.' Such a con-

⁴Rosaura Sánchez connects the 'pre-Cortesian mythmaking' of Chicana writing with Mexican modernist nationalism: 'the reconstruction of mythic texts has served [in Mexico] to legitimate modernizing political and economic practices by coupling the new with the autochthonous' (1997: 357). According to Cristina Beltran, 'In *Borderlands*, the claim for a politicized notion of hybridity, combined with pre-Cortesian mythmaking, is ... deeply indebted to Chicano discourse from the late 1960s and early 1970s' (2004: 595). Beltran also traces the notion of *mestizaje* in particular threads of Chicano civil rights discourse to Mexican intellectual and political thought of the 1920s: 'Anzaldúa recognizes that she is participating in an historical and ideological tradition that extends back at least as far as José Vasconcelos' 1926 [sic] *La raza cósmica*' (596). Judith Raiskin, for her part, has looked more closely into what she calls Anzaldúa's 'reworking of the modernist 'mestizo' of Mexican nationalism' (1994: 161–162). Yet despite her investigations into Anzaldúa's modernist influences, Raiskin posits modernism merely as historical backdrop to Anzaldúa's 'postmodern challenge' (156).

⁵A close look at contemporary readings of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera* shows critics often



ceptual framework makes it difficult to place *Borderlands* within a genealogy of modernist American ideas about race and gender.

3. QUIET AND TIMELESS BODIES

In privileging aspects of *mestizaje* seemingly resistant not just to white supremacy but to certain aspects of modernity, Anzaldúa inherited the idea that to be indigenous, or to be *mestiza* and to 'have' indigenous heritage, was to be not only socially and culturally different but, importantly, to be *temporally* different from so-called modern or developed peoples. As we will see, *Borderlands* was invested in presenting a rooted and aboriginal Chicana self inherited from Mexican/Chicano indigenist imaginings as inherently rural, 'totally immersed *en lo mexicano*, a rural peasant, isolated' (1987: 21).⁶ Anzaldúa's investment in a 'natives of the land' historiography is part of a tradition of representing the native or indigenous person as almost literally rooted in the earth. In *Borderlands*, for example, Chicanos were stripped 'of their land while their feet were still rooted in it ... we were jerked out by the roots' (7–8),⁷ while Anzaldúa longed for 'a homeground where she can plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample and *mestiza* heart' (1987: 23). In fact Anzaldúa would make an implicit analogy between a Chicana deep history located—'rooted'—in the land, and her own upbringing, presenting us with the image of herself as a girl: 'I have a vivid memory of an old photograph... I stand... the toes of my flat feet gripping the ground' (1987: 15). That grip was evidence for an indigenous heritage; but more importantly for *Borderlands*, such an image foregrounds what seems to be a basic female experience as a Chicana *mestiza*. In *Borderlands* Anzaldúa saw it as part of her task to defend the 'Indian in us', particularly the Indian woman who 'hid her feelings; she hid her truths ... She remained faceless and voiceless' (23).

assuming that the modernist aspects of *mestizaje* are superseded, in that they read her work either as a manifesto for a postmodern ethnic stance or as embodying the stylistic or substantive concerns of postmodernism. Although Joséba Gabilondo's 'Afterword' to the 1997 edition of José Vasconcelos' *La raza cósmica* noted that in writers like Anzaldúa, we can see that 'Vasconcelos' work is important today ... [because it] recovers a new urgency as the work that attempted to negotiate a position in relation to modernity and its institutions, not unconditionally but critically, ' he continues: 'It is not a coincidence that Chicano and Chicana writers have been the first to reuse Vasconcelos's work in new and original ways. These writers articulate their position from an awareness of not belonging to the formation of the nation-state; they come *after* modernity' (1997: 99–100; my emphasis). Readings of Anzaldúa's work as 'after modernity' have only intensified in the wake of Anzaldúa's death in 2004; for instance, Emma Perez's eulogy in the *NWSA Journal* maintained that ' [c]riticized by traditional historians who did not understand the creative impulse to move beyond Eurocentric Western European thinking, Gloria's scholarly study set up a new Borderlands. Her book became the progression toward postmodern, postnational identities for Chicanas/mestizas' (2005: 6). Alicia Gaspar de Alba's tribute in *American Quarterly* averred that "[m]estiza consciousness, ' in particular, became ... a way of understanding hybridity of race, sex, language, and culture within a global, postmodern context' (2004: vi).

⁶ Although Anzaldúa was raised from the age of eleven in a small town near the Texas border (Hargill) until she went to college, as she has said in a collection of interviews titled *Interviews: Entrevistas*, her travels took her away from such an environment pretty much for good. She moved to Austin to get her M.A., then worked with migrant workers in Indiana, and by 1977 had settled in San Francisco to write; she wrote some of *Borderlands* at a writing workshop in New Hampshire (2000: 42–45).

⁷ See Tace Hedrick's 'Bloodlines that Waver South: Hybridity, the 'South,' and American Bodies' (Fall 2003: 40, 45–52), for a discussion of the image of 'roots' in modernist Mexican and United States writings.

As theorists of modernism have pointed out, for many artists and thinkers immersed in the changes of modernity, a kind of 'anti-modernity' modernism prevailed: the authentic and timeless nature of the Indian was perceived both as modernity's opposite, and at the same time the necessary counterpart to the sterile, rational nature of modern people. In *Borderlands*, this was precisely the function of the Chicano's indigenous heritage: 'Let us hope', Anzaldúa wrote, 'that the left hand, that of darkness, of femaleness, of "primitiveness", can divert the indifferent, right-handed, "rational" suicidal drive that, unchecked, could blow us into acid rain in a fraction of a millisecond' (1987: 68–9). Yet because the history of *mestizaje* assumes an indigenous subject who is not just inherently silent, but whose racial character is apparent only through the surviving *mestizo*, throughout *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa maintained that *mestizo* Chicanos(as) would survive precisely because of the 'basic introverted racial temperament' (88) which Chicanos inherited from the Indians: 'Los Chicanos, how patient we seem, how very patient. There is the quiet of the Indian about us. We know how to survive... Stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that makes us unbreakable' (63).

The notion of racial character, or 'racial temperament', was an important point of concern for Mexican proponents of modernization and *mestizaje*. In his pioneering 1901 'social psychology' of the Mexican character, *La génesis del crimen en México*, Julio Guerrero looked to countless 'observers' of indigenous peoples before him, quoting the influential naturalist Alexander von Humboldt: 'The indigenous Mexican is grave, melancholy, silent' Guerrero himself maintained that '[t]he Mexican ... suffers lengthy attacks of melancholy, as can be seen in the elegiac, spontaneous tone of their poets, starting with [the Aztec poet] Nezahualcóyotl' (1901: 23–24). In countries like Mexico, the public policy of *mestizaje* often rested not on Mendel's but on Lamarck's theories, which asserted that an organism could inherit acquired characteristics. Thus, although by the 1920s Franz Boas' work in debunking much of the scientific eugenic tendency to conflate culture and biological race had filtered into the thinking of most of the important anthropologists in Latin America, racist logic was still deeply ingrained in reflections about the present-day 'silence of the defeated Indian', as Gabriela Mistral put it in 1923 (1997: 174). A neo-Lamarckian approach to race was more amenable to the state's insistence that a public policy of *mestizaje* could biologically evolve indigenous peoples by 'grafting' them onto white bodies.⁸ As Alan Knight puts it, for archeologists and anthropologists like Manuel Gamio, 'Indian inertia may ... be historically and psychologically—not strictly biologically—determined, but it [was] nonetheless deterministically inescapable' (1990: 94). Thus a popular position held that the Indian had suffered for so long under the consequences of the Conquest that his behavior and the state of his culture—both suffering from a quietude

⁸Luther Burbank, a famous United States horticulturist and contributor to the science of genetics, was a neo-Lamarckian whom Mexicans much admired; both Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo met and subsequently painted him. An influential plant breeder, Burbank grafted seedlings to fully developed plants in order to quickly appraise hybrid characteristics. Burbank assumed that the results of his graftings were his own 'molding effect' and evidence for the Lamarckian argument that acquired traits could be passed on genetically. Many Latin Americans assumed that Burbank's conclusions provided scientific evidence that a social program of 'genetic' and cultural education and 'grafting' could be successful in molding and therefore genetically 'evolving' humans as well.



which seemed like inertia—were innate, as closely akin to a *racial* quality as one might get without actually saying so.

Such ideas about the racial temperament of the Indian have long and deep roots in Mexican as well as United States thought, and Chicanos inherited such notions from both countries. As we have begun to see, in Mexico the nationalist project of *mestizaje* has, for the 20th century and into the twenty-first, been premised on the idea of a progressive, modern nation rooted in an indigenous, timeless past, just as Indians themselves were imagined to be rooted to the land on which the nation stood. Thus, elite Mexicans who constructed themselves as *mestizo*, and who used images of Mexican Indians laboring in the soil to evoke a sense of inherent ‘rootedness’ in *mexicanidad*, would themselves not necessarily have any connection with working the land. Yet unlike these Mexican elites, Chicano *movimiento* rhetoric and historiography, invested in the Chicano as himself not just *mestizo* but as inherently rural, took the modernist connection between the land and the Indian and reframed it. In this rereading of the inherent connection between Indians and the land, Chicanos, as the *mestizo* inheritors of indigenous blood, called for a restoration of the land—the nation of *Aztlán*—to themselves. Chicano activism and history in the 1970s, followed by Chicano studies scholarship in the 1980s, often assumed that Mexican-Americans were inherently rural and ‘traditional’ (Valdivieso 1990: 2), adhering to what Antonio Rios-Bustamante called the ‘natives of the land paradigm’ of Chicana/o historiography (2000: 273). This particular way of envisioning the history of Mexican Americans circulated heavily both during and after the Chicano *movimiento* in texts such as Corky González’ 1969 *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, Roldofo Acuña’s 1972 *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, and John Chávez’ 1984 *The Lost Land: The Chicano Images of the Southwest*. As I have noted, this viewpoint tended to concentrate on the United States Southwest—*Aztlán*—as homeland for Chicanos(as), and relied on several key points in its general description of Mexican Americans: by virtue of their *mestizo* heritage, Chicanos/as were indigenous, and by virtue of their indigenous heritage, Chicanos were native to the Southwest, reclaiming their connection to the land. Thus in the 1970s and into the 1980s many Chicanos read ‘nation’ and ‘land’ slightly differently than did earlier Mexicans; for both Mexican and Chicano projects, however, the nationalist appeal to the trope of the autochthonous, rooted Indian imagined indigenous peoples in a specific way: as possessing a racial character which was inherently melancholy and/or quiet, much like the silent land to which the indigenous person was attached.

Borderlands’ investment in this particular kind of historiography becomes clear in the first chapters, which connect the Mexican indigenous Virgen de Guadalupe (the ‘brown Virgen’ who first appeared to a converted Aztec farmer) with a folkloric notion of Chicano(a) identity. Here, Anzaldúa maintains that that ‘most’ Chicanos practice ‘a folk Catholicism. . . La Virgen de Guadalupe’s Indian name is Coatlatlopeuh. She is the central deity connecting us to our Indian ancestry’ (1987: 27). Mexican nationalism of the 1920s and 30s concentrated on imagining the Indian mother, often represented by the Virgen de Guadalupe, as the mother of the modern Mexican nation, producer of the modern Mexican *mestizo*. *Borderlands* re-emphasized the Virgen of Guadalupe and her Indian incarnation Coatlatlopeuh to re-frame the masculinist privilegings of male Aztec figures in the Chicano movement; land was ‘the source, the mother’,

and even when she had to leave it, Anzaldúa kept 'the ground of my own being. On it I walked away, taking with me the land' (1987: 16). Once again, we see that it is the indigenous heritage of the Chicano(a) that connects directly to 'mother earth':

Yes, the Chicano and Chicana have always taken care of growing things and the land ... The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, renacimiento de la tierra madre. This land was Mexican once/was Indian always/and is./And will be again (1987: 91).

As we will see, part of what is important to Anzaldúa about Vasconcelos's vision was his emphasis on the spiritual aspects of *mestizaje*. Yet, because his indigenism also followed the Mexican state-sponsored emphasis on the benefits of technology ('Indians have no door to the future but the door of modern culture' as he noted [1997: 16]), modernism like that of Vasconcelos (and others working for the state at the time) diverged in emphasis from artists and writers who were to some extent 'anti-modernity' or anti-technological while their work still operated within the conceptual parameters of a modernism which saw primitive and modern as opposites. Modernist artists in Mexico and the United States alike, looking for a cure for 'Western ... materialism, individualism, and Eurocentrism' (Znamenski 2007: 55), felt that Native Americans held the 'key' to an evolution wherein people would lead 'more spiritually and emotionally fulfilled lives' (55). Like these people, Anzaldúa posited a fusion of the modern with the unmodern not so as to move into a technological future but to absorb the energies of, as she put it, the primitive, the dark, the female so that 'One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration will take place' (1987: 63). The indigenism of state revolutionary art, such as the murals Diego Rivera painted in the 1920s and 1930s, also proposed a 'hybridizing' of the unmodern Indian with the modern Mexico, a fusion of 'organic' with 'modern'; yet for Diego indigenism would be used to celebrate technology rather than to reject it: in his 1930 Detroit murals, for example, Rivera looked for a way to fuse together the ancient, 'organic' nature of Mexico and the modern 'mechanical' nature of Detroit's factories by melding the image of a metal stamping machine with the squat, massive outlines of the Aztec image of Coatlicue, 'she of the Serpent Skirt.'⁹ Like Rivera, Anzaldúa looked for a fusion of what she believed to be the ancient and the modern: 'I sit here before my computer, *Amiguita* [little friend], my altar on top of the monitor with the *Virgen de Coatlapueh* candle and copal incense burning' (1987: 75). Like Rivera, she also used the image of Coatlicue to represent fusion; yet unlike his appropriation of this figure for a larger point about modernity, Anzaldúa saw Coatlicue herself as representing 'duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective ... a symbol of the fusion of opposites'—the indigenous *Virgen* and the modern computer, brought together in a 'new' *mestizaje* (1987: 46–47).

4. EVOLUTION, MESTIZAJE, AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Modernist thinking, as I have noted, could embrace seemingly contradictory assumptions about the primitive and the modern, and Latin Americans were no different. In

⁹See Tace Hedrick's *Mestizo Modernism: Race, Nation, and Identity in Latin American Culture, 1900–1940* for a more extensive discussion of 'fusion' in Diego Rivera's murals.



spite of their concerns with the degenerate nature of contemporary Mexican Indians, many Mexican artists and intellectuals looked to pre-Columbian Indian culture as a source especially for a spiritual energy which could counter the 'sterility' of modern materialism and technology. Chicano artists and writers in the 1970s, although not necessarily positing contemporary Native Americans as degenerate, followed Mexican cultural nationalism in appropriating an Aztec past as part of their historical heritage; and like their earlier counterparts, certain pre-Columbian native cultural beliefs and rituals came to seem a 'cure' for Western ills. In the first decades of the 20th century, in fact, many artists and writers in the United States, Latin America, and Europe were deeply concerned about the overly secular and materialist nature of modernity and its accompanying technology; but rather than looking to established religious authority, many were looking to alternative spiritual and esoteric beliefs which emphasized ancient wisdoms (often Asian or Southeast Asian), the most prominent of which was theosophy. Although we often do not think of spirituality and sexuality as linked, historians of religion such as Joy Dixon have shown that in their quest for a renewal of social as well as spiritual relations, theosophists in particular felt it was natural that gender and sexual roles be re-examined (1997: 408). In the 1970s, feminists concerned not just about spirituality and sexuality but also about the environment, such as Starhawk, were the inheritors of some of these ideas (Hammer 2001: 51).

Knowing this, we should not be surprised that Anzaldúa's (relatively) anti-technological stance took on some of the same concerns about modernity as did her predecessors. Thus, her work still resonates with early 20th century assumptions about the spirituality of the primitive: Anzaldúa recommends that the 'white sterility' of Anglos might be mitigated 'By taking up *curanderismo*, Santeria [sic], shamanism, Taoism, Zen and otherwise delving into the spiritual life and ceremonies of multi-colored people' (1987: 69). In fact, in its affirmation of the spiritual wisdom of ancient cultures, combined with a belief that the unification of opposites would result in a cosmic consciousness, such alternative religious belief systems as theosophy were enormously influential throughout Latin America through the 1940s, precisely because of their investment in a renewed sense of social as well as 'psychic ... wholeness' (Pike 1983: 539). *La raza cósmica*, for example, is filled with references to theosophical and other esoteric doctrines; in fact, Vasconcelos was a member of a theosophist lodge in Mexico City, and deeply involved in readings of esoteric doctrine. As historians of alternative religions have shown, theosophists were not merely concerned with the spiritual plane, but were also deeply concerned with the place of sex, gender, and sexuality in the spirituality of a modern world.¹⁰ In fact, as Joy Dixon notes, there were prominent theosophists who

had for some years been developing a complicated understanding of sexuality and sexual identity in an attempt to explore in concrete ways the 'organic connections' between (homo) sexuality and spirituality (1997: 414).

¹⁰For example, Annie Besant, a prominent British socialist and women's rights activist in the first decades of the twentieth century, was elected President of the Theosophical Society in 1907. Theosophy provided a space where issues such as feminism and socialism could be discussed and debated.

Yet as we have seen, modernist theosophical notions about sexuality could just as easily be read for heterosexual purposes: Vasconcelos' appeal to 'A mixture of races accomplished according to the laws of social well-being', leading inevitably to a 'beneficial spiritual Mendelianism' was of necessity heterosexual (1997: 16). For others, such as Gabriela Mistral and, later, Anzaldúa herself, an emphasis on the ideas of hybridity and primitive spirituality could leave room for a specifically queer reading of the place of indigenous spirituality within the discourse of *mestizaje*.¹¹ Anzaldúa's same appeal as Vasconcelos, to 'the great alchemical work' which would lead to a 'spiritual *mestizaje*', would now be made in the name of a racial fusion which implied a queer rather than heterosexual reading of *mestizaje*: 'As a lesbian I have no race ... but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races' (1987: 16).

An important image in the constellation of tropes signifying a beneficial *mestizaje* in *Borderlands* is that of 'cross-pollenization' or cross-breeding. The terminology of cross-breeding ties directly with Latin American artists and intellectuals for whom the agricultural and biological sciences provided an imagery of roots, grafts, and hybrids for an artistic vocabulary to represent the fusion of the antimonies of modern and primitive. As Frederick Pike observes, Latin Americans in the first part of the 20th century were particularly interested in imagining 'the merging of opposites in which ... new life ensues from ecstatic union rather than from catastrophe' (1983: 480). Anzaldúa began the chapter in *Borderlands* titled 'Towards a New Consciousness' by providing 'her take' on Vasconcelos' exposition of this fusion in *La raza cósmica*: 'Vasconcelos...envisaged *una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas afines, una raza de color—la primera raza síntesis del globo* ... His theory is one of inclusivity ... from this ... cross-pollenization, an "alien" consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*' (1987: 78). Her reading of Vasconcelos' *mestizaje* as one of 'inclusivity' signaled her reframing of the modernist meanings of a term such as 'cross-pollenization' and at the same a reorienting of the historical questions of sexuality and desire implicit in Mexico's efforts to shape a unified *mestizo* nation.

In Mexico, Vasconcelos was one of the few to publicly theorize desire in *mestizaje*. How to make sure people of different races would want to have sex with the proper partners, in order to bring forth a new and eugenically healthy race? Here Vasconcelos departed (in somewhat bizarre terms, it would seem to us) from the much more careful assertions of racial and cultural 'approximations' advised by people like Manuel Gamio. Instead, Vasconcelos posited the emergence in the (not-so-distant) future of what he called an 'esthetic eugenics' whereby only the most beautiful specimens of each race would desire each other: 'in a few decades of esthetic eugenics', Vasconcelos asserted, 'the Black may disappear, together with the types that a free instinct of beauty may go on signaling as fundamentally recessive and undeserving...of perpetuation' (1987: 32). Although his assertion of an 'esthetic eugenics' might seem bizarre to our ears, popularized ideas of the new science of sexology were much on the

¹¹ Judith Raiskin reviews how 'Categories of sexual behavior and identity created by 19th and 20th century sexologists were also influenced by the classification systems of race, whereby people of color ... and homosexuals were conflated through the ideas of evolution and degeneration' (1994: 157). She goes on to outline some of the basic ideas of modernist thinkers and writers on sexology such as Havelock Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, and Edward Carpenter.



minds of Mexicans. Latin American intellectuals read with intense interest those anthropologists who suggested associations between the sexuality and the spirituality of primitive cultures. For example, among the popular anthropological studies of the 'primitive' which were read both in the United States and in Mexico were works by Bronislaw Malinowski and Robert Marett, who both made the claim that primitive peoples were natural mystics. The influential gay socialist, theosophist, and writer Edward Carpenter, had already posited such a connection in his 1919 book *Intermediate Types Among Primitive Folk*, looking to anthropological and historical accounts of primitive priests and shamans who were 'especially suited in their roles as mediators and prophets because of their homosexuality' (Carpenter 1975: 98). Carpenter's investigations into the history and anthropology of the sexually 'intermediate' primitive concluded by asserting that 'I think there is an organic connection between the homosexual temperament and unusual psychic or divinatory powers' (1975: 49). The widely held idea that homosexuality constituted a mixture, or fusion, of masculine and feminine in the same body meant that Carpenter could claim that as the fusion of opposites, the 'double-engine psychic power' of the homosexual could 'point to a further degree of evolution ... It may possibly lead to the development of that third order of perception which has been called the cosmic consciousness' (63). The idea that the 'berdache' or 'two-spirit' Native American was considered to have magical or spiritual power because of his presumed homosexuality has been a popular one since well before the beginning of the 20th century, and was revived around the first part of the 20th century as part of a larger body of ideas devoted to the notion that (primitive) homosexuals often served as magic or spiritual figures. Indeed, Carpenter cites, among others, Frazer's 1912 *Adonis, Attis, and Osiris* as well as John Irving's 1835 *Indian Sketches* as sources for his discussion of the connection between (primitive) spirituality and homosexuality (1975: 15). Such modernist notions of the primitive resonate with *Borderlands* assumptions both about a new cosmic consciousness and a queer subjectivity:

I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female ... half and half, mita' y mita' ... But there is a magic aspect in abnormality ... sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures' magico-religious thinking (1987:19).

Thus when Anzaldúa maintained that queers are the 'supreme crossers of cultures ... all colors, all classes, all races ... Our role is to link people with one another' (1987: 84), she was making a fairly complex association between what were differing, though themselves connected, areas of concern: sexuality, racial theory, spirituality—all of which used some of the same imagery of (in this case, plant) 'hybridity' to think through the concerns of modernization and nationalism. Such an association becomes clear in *Borderlands* when she says, 'Indigenous like corn, like corn, the *mestiza* is a product of crossbreeding ... the *mestizo* and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum' (85).

As we have also seen, thinkers in the early decades of the 20th century tended to frame their ideas not just about race but about sexuality with references to popularized evolutionary genetics. Anzaldúa echoes such language: 'if the center holds, we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward ... the *mestizo* and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are

a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together' (1987: 85). Although early 20th century Mexicans would not be as open about homosexuality as, for example, Carpenter was, his work was read in Latin America: and the idea of a 'hybrid' (Carpenter's term) person, one who encompassed both masculine and feminine, would for Latin Americans thinking about homosexuality in a positive way, make a good fit with images of 'fusion' in discourses of *mestizaje*. Thus, like modernists in Latin America as well as elsewhere, Anzaldúa conflated what she thought of as racial/sexual 'evolution' with the notion of blending, or fusion. Although 'evolution' is today usually assumed to be metaphorical, the immensely popular Spencerian idea of a biological (racial) 'evolutionary' change which can be effected by, or which can effect, *social* (or even spiritual) change continues to carry much weight: 'For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed' (Anzaldúa 1987: 75).

Although she notes that many of her images are metaphorical, Anzaldúa's modernist heritage as well as her continuing emphasis on her own physicality warns us not to take her discussions of the biological nature of *mestizaje* as completely figurative: when she wrote '*soy un amasamiento* [literally, a kneading of corn dough], I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining' (1987: 81), if we understand her position in the American history of such imagery we as readers must take her both literally and metaphorically. As she mapped *mestizaje* onto her lesbian identity, despite maintaining that she 'made the choice to be queer', her queerness is clearly both metaphor and physicality. Thus we have to take her seriously when she averred in *Borderlands* that queers were two genders making a 'third'; for her, there was a literal aspect to this image. This is of a piece with her debt to, and reframing of, modernist ideas about genetics, fusion, *mestizaje*, and the spiritual and racial 'crossing' abilities of mixed-race and queer people.

5. A PROVISIONAL AND INCOMPLETE PROJECT

Toward the end of the prose section of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa thinks about the book overall:

In looking at this book that I'm almost finished writing, I see a mosaic pattern (Aztec-like) emerging ... with the gesso underpainting that is red earth, black earth ... I see the barely contained color threatening to spill over the boundaries of the object it represents and into other 'objects' and over the borders of the frame. I see a hybridization of metaphor, different species of ideas popping up here, popping up there, full of variations and seeming contradictions, though I believe in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit. (66)

Here Anzaldúa makes clear that she herself sees how her metaphors slip and bleed into each other and (I assume) the contradictory ways they also slip between categories such as biological race and culture, sexuality and (biological) sex. 'The whole thing', she continues, 'has had a mind of its own' (66). I suggest that this 'mind' is the text's 'political unconscious', one which remained, despite its queer, feminist, and antiracist sentiments, invested in modernist assumptions even as the United States moved more and more fully into the social and economic changes of late global capitalism. Metaphor operates in just this way: doing the work of embodying the



past in the present, materializing contradictions, relying on paradox. The metaphors on which the discourse of *mestizaje* has depended are so innately ambiguous, and lend themselves to such different projects, precisely because they depend on material bodies and processes to figure forth, even to 'prove', social and cultural assumptions. One of those assumptions, as we have seen, is that the quietude and timelessness of a mythical, dark, primitive body is the necessary other of the rationality and time-sense of white, modern bodies. As Hortense Spillers notes in 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe' (published the same year as *Borderlands*), framing 'ethnicity' under the aegis of a 'mythical time' 'enable(s) a writer to perform a variety of conceptual moves all at once. Under its hegemony ... the body, in its material and abstract phase, becomes a source for metaphor' (1987: 66). There can be no doubt that pressing questions of race, sexuality, and culture are still with us, and Anzaldúa rightly felt the need to revisit and reframe those questions. But like the projects of earlier Latin American modernists, her *mestiza* body—particularly in its indigenous aspects—was often invested all over again, 'frozen', within a modernist vision of mythical timelessness.

Thus the outlines of modernist assumptions—especially about time, progress, race and sexuality—are still part of the conceptual framework of much late 20th century and early 21 century thought. The modern project was, and remains, as John Frow contends, 'an operation; it performs a certain work, it makes certain things possible, including some of the forms of difference from the past...that it imagines as given in the order of things' (1997: 3). That is, the continuing force of modernist concepts literally shapes our thinking, so that it seems to us that in fact traditional, minority, indigenous, colored, or 'underdeveloped' groups *are* categorically different from modern, 'developed' white nations and peoples. It is the organizing concepts of modernity themselves which make such differences seem so apparent. However much she posited the *mestiza* body as inherently moveable and changeable, Anzaldúa's metaphors under which her queer *mestiza* bodies operated constantly wavered toward their 'fixing' in a timeless and unmodern place.

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa's emphasis on fusion culminates in a vision of the gathering-together of 'the splintered and disowned parts of *la gente mexicana* (the Mexican people)'; holding them 'in [her] arms' (1987: 88). To say that she inherited a set of modernist assumptions which posited, in often negative ways, the dark and/or indigenous body as modernity's necessary other is only to make clear her place in a history of such assumptions. But more important is to show the ways that the contradictions inherent in those assumptions worked to allow her to reframe a modernist worldview of race and sexuality as positive, healing, and liberatory. Here, Anzaldúa looked to Latin American conversations about race and sexuality which appeared to talk truth to the technologically-driven and imperialist power of white supremacy in the United States. Yet as Helene Lorenz and Mary Watkins observe, there is no way to be completely free from those tropes and assumptions which, through our very language, construct a worldview; not even a post-colonial or a presumably postmodern consciousness 'can promise a safe distance in which we can stand free of the cultural constructs that have formed us and with which we constantly collude' (2002). Thus, even transformational projects such as Anzaldúa's will remain, as Lorenz and Watkins put it, 'always

provisional and incomplete', leaving such projects embedded in, but also re-visioning, a long genealogy of *mestizaje* and indigenism.

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