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Alicia Arrizón

TRANSCULTURAL PERFORMATIVES: Sexual and Linguistic Acts

Este ensayo propone una re-evaluación de las propuestas teóricas del mestizaje a través de una exploración del concepto dentro de prácticas culturales lesbianas latinas, especialmente las configuraciones de actos sexuales y lingüísticos. Partiendo de la propuesta de Gloria Anzaldúa sobre la formulación de una subjetividad latina queer y mestiza, este ensayo presenta una nueva aproximación teórica para el análisis del performance y el teatro lésbico latino en los Estados Unidos. Alicia Arrizón discute el trabajo del grupo performer lésbico californiano Butchalis de Panochtitlán y la obra de la artista visual chicana Alma López como prácticas artísticas envueltas en la redefinición de estos términos y conceptualizaciones teóricas. En este ensayo la teorización de un mestizaje queer emerge de las hibridaciones identitarias propulsadas en las genealogías, tanto incónicas como performativas, manifestadas a través de los cuerpos de las artistas queer latinas.

"Lesbian" doesn't name anything in my homeland. Unlike the word "queer," "lesbian" came late into some of our lives. Call me de las otras. Call me loquita, jotita, marimacha, pajuelona, lambiscona, culera —these are words I grew up hearing. I can identify with being "una de las otras" or a "marimacha," or even a "jota" or a loca porque—these are the terms my home community uses. I identify most closely with the Náhuatl term patlache. These terms situate me in South Texas Chicano/mexicano culture and in my experiences and recuerdos. These Spanish/Chicano words resonate in my head and evoke gut feelings and meanings.¹

This passage exemplifies Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptual theories about the queer body as developed in her writings. I, like most Chicana

feminists, rely on her identity politics, especially when dealing with the concepts of *mestizaje* and the queer body.² The theoretical legacy Anzaldúa

1. Anzaldúa, "To(o) Queer the Writer-Loca, escritora y chicana," in *Living Chicana Theory*, edited by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley: Third Women Press, 1998), 263.

2. This essay is a short excerpt from Chapter Five: "Epistemologies of 'Brownness: Deployments of the Queer Mestiza Body" from my book *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006). The book provides historical and cultural perspectives of mestizaje and integrates discussions of racial hybridity, feminist, and queer studies. It also considers what is culturally, politically and intellectually at stake in past and contemporary invocations of *mestizaje*. *Mestizaje* is conceived as the result of colonial encounters and symbolically is marked by transdisciplinary interventions influenced by postcolonial discourses in feminist, queer, and critical race theories.

has left us contributes to imagine the queer Latina body through various linguistic and race configurations that function as a mode of transcultural performatives. The common knowledge of language as performative is applied here in the context of transculturation, which is understood in its relation to *mestizaje*. If we accept the view that processes of cultural encounter and exchange are clearly engendered in the struggle for representation in Anzaldúa's utterances, the meaning of transcultural performatives seek to displace hegemonic power as a crucial aspect of the polyvalent mode implicit in her theorizations. This is the overarching aim of her analysis of *mestizaje* as it relates to sexualized bodies and the unequivocal powers of desire. In this essay, I am interested in developing a methodology to comprehend Anzaldúa's utterances which make self-evident the enactment of queer bodies as an effect of transculturation. By looking at Anzaldúa's queer utterances, I intend to argue that language is itself a performative method that takes place and develops in the context of intersectional meaning. In the second part of the essay, I connect this argument to the analysis of masculinity as enacted by the Butchalis de Panochtitlán (BdP), a Los Angeles-based performance ensemble of butch/dyke/transgenders. I also include a brief analysis of Alma López's digital documentary *Boi Hair* (2005): a short digital video about short hair.

While *mestizaje* may represent the illusionary notions of multiculturalisms—both past and present—in contemporary terms, it has been developed within the anti-essentialist

critique of the ethnic, racial, and cultural conception of identity. To the extent that cultural identity requires a reconceptualization or rearticulation of the relationship between subject formation and discursive practices, I believe that *mestizaje*, which entails the interplay of history in the process of representation, is the answer. However, this also requires locating the racialized, ethnicized, and sexualized body: beginning in the late twentieth century, *mestizaje* has become a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize hybrid sites of experience and empowerment. It has been used by artists and intellectuals as an ideology of resistance as much as a national allegory or both simultaneously. This evolution is clearly marked by the vast influence of Anzaldúa since the 1987 publication of her *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.³ Although Anzaldúa's new mestiza body has prompted many discourses and critiques, surprisingly, the idea of *mestizaje* as a form of transculturation has remained unexplored. Most critiques have ignored the concept as it relates to the problem of colonial representation and neocolonial subjectivity. Neither has the notion of *mestizaje* been considered in the context of the coming together of diverse cultures. This is unfortunate given that in addition to being a marker that imagines the intercultural subject, *mestizaje* involves the performance of an endless alterity (otherness), which complies with the borderline negotiations of cultural difference. Overall, the discourses generated by Anzaldúa's notion of "borderlands" suggest a

3. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987), 85.

specific kind of epistemological disposition that resists the hegemonic Western knowledge.

According to Anzaldúa, the lesbian category is problematic and thus must be differentiated within a cultural context, which in her approach is derived from race consciousness. In the above quotation, she purposely employs different cultural signifiers in Spanish that may substitute for the contestatory lesbian category, while proposing alternative ways of understanding the specificity of certain gendered-queer categories. With her choice of these cultural and linguistic markers, Anzaldúa is alluding to the theory of disidentification which I develop below. She connects with broad possibilities and classifies certain kinds of queerness. The queer body appears in translation, occupying specific spaces and modifying linguistic, cultural, and political engagements.

In Anzaldúa's terms, to disidentify is to dislocate the configuration of the lesbian category while recognizing other categorizations. The "alterity" of lesbianism emerges as a mode of cultural and transcultural resignifications, in which multiple layers of expression make explicit intrinsic ideologies of sexualized subjectivities. The texture of Anzaldúa's distinct notions of queer experience provides rich examples illustrative of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory that all speech utterances are heteroglot and polyphonic, performing a resonance with different

voices and words. For Bakhtin, heteroglossia and polyphony are central to the sites that mediate the process of signification in any utterance. Through heteroglossia, subject formation is established culturally and socially, mediated by the ideologies inherent in the diverse languages that lay claim to its experience. On another hand, polyphony illustrates the capacity of utterances to intersect in a dialogic relationship.⁴ The layering of voices within one voice for Anzaldúa is most evident when trying to capture the "gut feelings and meanings" of individual and collective experience in which language, as a material practice, is always formed through the multiple subject positions she embodies.

Anzaldúa (dis)identifies herself through the process of *mestizaje*, which she conceptualizes as a racial category embedded in linguistic codes, notably, ones that often emerge in contrast to the white body (lesbian). She made this argument clearly in her 1988 Plenary Lecture to the National Women's Studies Association, alluding repeatedly to "mestiza lesbians" and "mestiza queer persons."⁵ Anzaldúa's lesbian markings are determined by a process of disidentification that adamantly incorporates the *mestiza* body. This assertion must be understood in its historical condition, in which race consciousness forms the basis of disidentification. In locating a *mestiza* body linked to indigenous/Mexican/

4. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony do not simply celebrate linguistic diversity but they allude to the coexistence of "languages" within a language. This process of coexistence is generated in a state of tension and competition, caught in the borderline of dialectical relations.

5. The title of her address was "Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar, or Island." Her presentation was later published in *Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances*.

Chicano legacies, Anzaldúa considers these legacies as crucial to recoup the figures of cultural memory. Accordingly, in response to an art exhibition dealing with such issues, she wrote, "I ask myself, what does it mean to me *esta jotita*, this queer Chicana, this *mexicatejana*, to enter a museum and look at indigenous objects that were once used by my ancestors? Will I find my historical Indian identity here in this museum among the ancient artifacts and their *mestizaje*?"⁶ A constant search for the "native" body is now part of her "spiritual reality," which she recognized as *Nahualismo* (loosely translated as "shamanism").⁷ The need to "identify" with a "historical Indian identity" enables Anzaldúa to "disidentify" with a dominant Anglo/Eurocentric system of representation. Moreover, the manifestation of a queer subjectivity (*esta jotita*), insists on the translation of the feminine/feminist body.⁸ Although Anzaldúa's ideological premises can be full of contradictions, they are definitely a manifestation of the space within which racialized sexuality operates. She locates her inner self and social agency in relation to the gaze that produces her, paradoxically, as both subject and commodity. This dialectical process produces articulations that are partially engaged and partially disengaged with the Western imagination.

Furthermore, the in-between-ness produces subjectivities created by identifications of a difference that is itself subjected to processes of rejection against normalized knowledges and power structures.

Feminists such as Diana Fuss and Judith Butler have attempted to understand the origin of identification in psychoanalytic theory. It has emerged as one of the most difficult concepts in contemporary theory and politics. As Fuss puts it, "Identification is only one philosophical approach to the problem of alterity."⁹ In theory, disidentification captures the ambiguities intrinsic in processes of identification through which subjectivity can be determined. Thus the many signifiers used by Anzaldúa to reconfigure the gendered queer body — *marimacha*, *pajuelona*, *lambiscona*, *culera*, *jota*, and so on — make up a politics of disidentification, which helps to find agency for the racialized body. The politics of disidentification regarding the racialized queer body is the focus of José Muñoz in, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). According to Muñoz, to "disidentify" is a political act that resists dominant ideology and exemplifies "a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture."¹⁰ Although

6. Anzaldúa was responding to "Aztec: The World of Moctezuma," an art exhibition at the Denver Museum of National History. Report published as "Chicana Artists: Exploring nepantla, *el lugar de la frontera*," NACLA: Report on the Americas, vol. XXVII, no. 1 (July/August 1993), 37.

7. Karin Rosa Ika, *Chicana Ways: Conversations With Ten Chicana Writers* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2002), 15.

8. The standard form of the term is masculine, *joto*, which is a derogatory Mexican-Spanish name for homosexual. Its closest English translation is faggot.

9. Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers: Readings on Psychoanalysis, Sexuality, and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 9.

10. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

disidentification is not a new theory (Butler's use of the concept, for example, is derived from the work of Michel Pêcheux), in Muñoz's frame of reference, the queer-racialized body alters the grounds of the theoretical subject. By concentrating on the performances of "queers of color," Muñoz tries to develop a theory of subjectivity that would mark the differences between white normativity/heteronormativity and the queer-racialized body. The discourses of women of color, including the work of Anzaldúa, have helped Muñoz expand and uphold a politics of disidentification. He adopts this politics not only to empower the specificities of minority subjectivities, but also to suggest that the coercive body of marginality produces a new sense of reality, which articulates an uncanny truth about the dominant culture. Muñoz's argument about dominant versus marginal is often contradictory, but it strongly puts forward the condition of the performative and the twin problems of agency and subjectivity. His more recent analysis of "brownness" situates the Latino body and its imaginative sites of ethnicity as "a structure of feeling" against the performance of racialized normativity. This racialized normativity is for him the "affects" of whiteness, defined as a "cultural logic" of regulatory practices.¹¹

Similarly, Anzaldúa's multiple configurations of the queer-*mestiza* body invoke these problems but provide sufficient grounds for an understanding of agency within the act of cultural

"translation." The linguistic processes, which occur when Anzaldúa shifts from one language to another, resist the hegemonic system of language. In addition, her formulations seek out the subject positions presupposed by the utterances. Anzaldúa shows interest in Foucauldian thought, in which subjects are discursively constituted and connected by their historical condition. But in contrast to Foucault, whose analysis of sexuality is limited by his failure to address the gendered and racialized body, Anzaldúa has constructed a theoretical framework where racialized desire and sexuality can be mapped. Abdul R. JanMohamed suggested that Foucault's limitations result from his universalizing method, which failed to locate the specificities of "Euro-American white bourgeois history."¹² It is precisely such universal conceptions of the body that make the inscription of the "brownness" or *mestizaje* both necessary and relevant. If for Foucault, the "power" of knowledge is what compels subjects to "act," for Anzaldúa, the sense of this power is subjected to both race consciousness and sexuality.

From the Spanish term *marimacha* to the Náhuatl derivative *patlache* (dyke), Anzaldúa marks a body suggestive of linguistic and cultural translations. Being a "lesbian" is a totally different experience from being a *marimacha* or a *tortillera*. The term *marimacha*, for example, focuses attention on the colonial legacy and its

11. José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown," *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000), 67-79.

12. Abdul R. JanMohamed, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border: Foucault, Wright, and the Articulation of 'Racialized Sexuality,'" in *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, edited by Donna C. Stanton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 94-116.

relation to *marianismo* and *machismo*. These concepts have been considered vital to understanding gender relations in Latino cultures. *Marianismo*, modeled after the Virgin Mary, creates a feminine ideal of purity and passivity by which women are expected to live. On the other hand, the double body inflection in *marimacha* symbolically alters the "Mary complex" – imagine the configuration of Mary as the macho woman. Although Anzaldúa uses *marimacha* in general terms to substitute for and "translate" the possibilities of the lesbian body, including the Butch and Femme, the term challenges the gender system subsumed at the heart of *marianismo*, threatening the historically subordinate position of women established with the imposition of Christianity. A woman might be characterized as a *marimacha* simply because she does not have children. But more commonly, the term is applied to a woman who manifested a certain type of sexual aggressiveness or one who dressed and looked like a man. As awkward as the term *marimacha* may seem, the body at stake is surely contentious. Despite its homophobic origins, the term has been reclaimed as an oppositional reconception of the traditional gender role.

In its hyphenated version, *marimacha* may represent a version of

"queer" interpolation, suggesting a genealogy where the "feminine" and "masculine" come together—a location where gender is fluid and destabilized. This double-body experience describes a "woman" who personifies masculinity and may feel more masculine than feminine. But in its own epistemological experience, it is a body organized by stylistic structures and certain power relations. The masculinization of the brown female body requires the "liminal" negotiation of cultural difference. As enacted by the Butchalis de Panochtitlán (BdP), a Los Angeles-based performance ensemble of butch/dyke/transgenders, the masculinization of the Latina body represents transgressive acts of transformed corporalities.¹³ I am not necessarily interested in the theatricality of these bodies (or the lack of), but in the negotiation of signifiers that attempt to perform *mestizaje* within the enactment of queer epistemologies.¹⁴ This negotiation must initially consider the hybridity illustrated in the composition of the term *panochtitlán*: the first signifier refers to the *panocha*, which is the vernacular Spanish term used in the Mexican/Chicano context for the vagina; the second, alludes to *Tenochtitlán*, the promise land of the Aztecs, now Mexico City.¹⁵ In its hybrid composition, *panochtitlán* represents the need to

13. The BdP group includes Raquel Gutiérrez, Claudia Rodríguez, Mari García, and Nadine Romero. The group has performed at various venues such as Highways Performance Space and Self-Help Graphics (Los Angeles), Galeria de la Raza (San Francisco) and at college campuses throughout Southern and Northern California.

14. The work of the BdP group is often criticized as unprofessional and bad acting. Although the group lacks good directing techniques and choreographies, the ideas presented in their work are powerful and worth of analysis.

15. The Aztecs began to build their city Tenochtitlán around the year 1325 AD. The city flourished until the year 1521 when Hernán Cortés and his Spanish army invaded and occupied the city. After the Aztecs were defeated by the Spaniards, the Aztec city was destroyed so the invaders could build and construct the new Spanish city on top of the Aztec ruins. Today, the ruins of Tenochtitlán is a very dramatic site, located under the present-day Mexico City. After nearly five hundred years, little has been found of the ancient capital city of the Aztecs. Nonetheless, excavation continues in hopes that more will be uncovered.

"identify," like in Anzaldúa's identity politics, with indigenous signifiers in order to "disidentify" with the "regulatory" sites of dominant U.S. culture. The liminality expressed in the hybridity of the term *panochtitlán* is symbolically captured in the performances of bodies that not only disrupt the sites of heteronormativity but also aim to celebrate the fluidity of gender socialization and its representation. Explaining their work, BdP states that they are not trying to imitate men in their masculinization of the Latina brown body but instead are exploring "the identities and the neighborhoods [they] claim and are claimed by."¹⁶ This is explored in *Teenage Papi: The Second Coming of Adolescence* (2005), in which through various sketches, BdP situates the intersectionality of space and identities as tropes of a queer representation rooted in the sites of the *barrio* (Latino neighborhoods). The sketches include: "Working Class Butch Latina/o identities" (City Terrace); "Interracial Desire" (Montebello); "Family Guilt-Latino Queerness" (East Los Angeles); "Bar Culture/Softball Culture" (El Sereno); "Gentrification" (Silverlake); and "Class/Classism" (all of LA Metro).¹⁷ The group describes their performance as "tales of tender tops and bossy bottoms, baby daddy diary entries, BDSM thuggery, ride-or-die femmes and more." Much of the language used is marked by a queer-lesbian vernacular culture trying to capture

embodiments of female masculinities. As a celebration of the macho cockless *vatos* (dudes), the various sketches in *Teenage Papi* resist the idea that only men possess the "gift" of masculinity. The enactment of masculinity, as understood by the BdP ensemble, is not a rejection of femininity but a performance of female masculinities that are often ignored by, or misunderstood in, our society.¹⁸

The transgendered/transculturated body marked in all these linguistic configurations—from *marimacha* and *patllache* to *panochtitlán*—invoke an intersectional alliance between *mestizaje* and queer theory. For Anzaldúa this alliance has strong mystical connections: "[t]he *mestizo* and the queer exit at this time and point on the revolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls." (85) The linking of "*mestiza* theory" to "queer theory" conveys articulations that rely on the cross-cultural analysis emerging as the protagonist of transcultural performatives. Similarly, the digital creations of Alma López, are symbolically reproduced as the result of an intersectional aesthetics in which the performance of transcultural bodies and events are linked to queer desire, the divine, and mythological sites. In "Lupe and La Sirena in Love" (1999), for instance, López represents a love

16. The quote is taken from the groups' website <http://www.butchalis.com>.

17. *Teenage Papi: The Second Coming of Adolescence* was written by Raquel Gutiérrez and Claudia Rodríguez. The DVD of *Teenage Papi* was released in May, 2005, after it was produced at Highways Performance Space (Santa Monica, California). The group continually presents their work at universities and other performance spaces around the United States.

18. BdP was recently featured in *Curve: The Best-Selling Lesbian Magazine*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (October 2005): 19.

affair between Sirena, the mermaid image on a *lotería* card (*lotería* is a bingo-like game) and the Virgin of Guadalupe, the divine mother of cultural *mestizaje* for Mexicans and Chicano communities. In this depiction of love, Sirena and Guadalupe embrace in the company of angels. All around the two women are the Los Angeles cityscape and the U.S./Mexico border. While López's modification of bodies through a computer-generated system alters the notions about static definitions of art, her artistic approach maintains a critical position to multiple heteronormative spaces. In making visible queer and *mestizo* bodies, López (best known as the Chicana Digital Diva) composes distinctive artwork that integrates lesbian desire with Mexican and Chicano pop icons, urban settings, and nationalist myths.

López's first experimental digital documentary, *Boi Hair*, features three butch lesbians, including among them Claudia Rodriguez, a member of BdP. The other two women in the documentary are: Alice Y. Hom (a Chinese-American community activist), and Lizette Sanchez (a Puerto Rican born in California). The women in the film discuss their hair styles, their sexuality, and how they are perceived by others in their communities and families. In her website, López states: "I love and admire butch women, and this project is an attempt to understand them

as well as creating a space for them to speak about their hair, and for audiences to understand butch hair issues."¹⁹ More importantly, is the highlighting of butch sexuality. The presence of butch lesbians, nearly misunderstood not only in mainstream society but in queer spaces as well, has the effect that gender and sexuality are constructs which can be transgressively "performed." Judith Butler's famous model of gender performance which suggests that gender is a process in which identity can be instituted through a "stylized repetition of acts," is obviously explicit.²⁰ The community of butch women included in López's documentary and the focus on their short hair is an act which represents and authorizes the butch body as something used not only with an attempt to destabilize the fallacy of normativity but as the enactment of a new kind of masculinity which offers the prospect of great empowerment.

The BdP members and the butch women in *Boi Hair* personify the theoretical subject discussed by Judith Halberstam in her groundbreaking book, *Female Masculinity*, which studies women who feel masculine and/or performs certain types of masculinity that are also linked to the notion of lesbian desire. She argues that female masculinity plays a significant, albeit disregarded, part in the history and development of masculinity.²¹ It is important here to consider the frame of

19. See <http://latinoartcommunity.org/community/ChicArt/ArtistDir/AlmLop.html>, 1. For an update on Alma López's art and exhibits consult her website www.almalopez.net/. *Boi Hair* has been screened in different venues including in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico (Summer, 2005), and at the 2005 Outfest (The 23rd Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Film Festival). The video is twenty-minute long.

20. Judith Butler, "Performative acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, edited by Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 270.

reference through which “female masculinity,” “brown” female masculinity in particular, operates. For the BdP members, the “brown” queer female masculinity necessitates the capturing of the *marimacha* as an epistemology of knowledge that must be reclaimed. As hybrid bodies, the *marimacha* and other female masculinities are not simply the product of discursive regimes, nor are they applicable only to female drag. Rather, they are a re-articulation of queer representation and identifications counteracting heteronormative/patriarchal culture. In this context, the *marimacha* experience may at times become a radical deconstruction of gender performativity. This deconstruction is itself inherent in a body that moves across the boundaries of gender. It

suggests that the transgender experience does not always involve parodic impersonation such as Butler’s idea of gender performativity, but sometimes, it is actually the embodiment of the site of performance. Thus, as a genealogy of a queer female masculinity that imagines the sites of racialized sexuality, the *marimacha* “lesbian” genealogy allegorizes the need to authorize articulations of self formed by the performance of difference and enactment of cultural survival. The confronting of “lesbianism in the flesh,” as Cherrie Moraga so aptly discuss, “is the avenue through which [she has] learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to [her] that we are not free human beings.”²² 

21. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). Halberstam’s main thesis proposes the study of masculinity without men. She argues that female masculinity is not a throwaway appendage of the dominant masculinity but is, indeed, an important element to the whole concept of masculinity. In her writing, she expresses a true commitment to end the historical stigmatization in which female-masculine bodies have been trapped and “to make masculinity safe for women and girls.” (268).

22. Cherrie Moraga, La Güera in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983), 28-29.

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