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camille back

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Unsettling Dominant Narratives:

Borderlands/La Frontera as a Pathway toward a “New” Perspective on Queer Theory

Camille Back

In his 2009 El Mundo Zurdo plenary speech titled “Santa Nepantla: A Borderlands Sutra,” Randy P. Conner, an intimate and life-long friend and *comadre* of Gloria Anzaldúa, claimed that she was probably the first one to use the term “queer” in an academic context, opening a space for discussion around Anzaldúa’s contributions to the development of queer theories. This is the space I would like to reopen today. In most of queer theory’s self-narratives, the first introduction of the terms “queer” and “queer theory” into the academic sphere is attributed to Teresa de Lauretis who coined the expression in “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” after a conference held at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1990. However, there are other genealogies.¹ Gloria Anzaldúa clearly defines herself as queer since 1981 and the publication of “La Prieta” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, and later on, in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). However, when formulating her queer theory, de Lauretis only briefly mentions Anzaldúa’s work without even emphasizing her use of the term “queer” or discussing her work, which nevertheless constitutes a precedent to her own formulation.

This chapter is a genealogical effort that aims to highlight the precursory and groundbreaking role of Anzaldúa whose contributions to the elaboration of queer theories (like those of many other queers of color) have been erased from current genealogies. I’m not the first one approaching this issue, and my work is indebted to Randy P. Conner’s “Santa Nepantla,” José Esteban Muñoz’s introduction to *Disidentifications*, Michael Hames-García’s “Queer Theory Revisited,” Evelyn Hammonds’ “Black (W)holes,” AnaLouise Keatings’ insights in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, and Norma Alarcón, Paola Bacchetta, and Jules Falquet’s introduction to *Les Cahiers du CEDREF* where an entire chapter of *Borderlands/La*

Frontera was translated into French. Following and furthering their analysis, I would like to show, as Hames-García rightfully puts it, that queer theory has never fully nor adequately questioned the fact that it was founded on the erasure of an important collection of poetic and critical texts written by queers of color even though these works were sometimes included in genealogies for strategic purposes (28). This chapter therefore focuses on a critical analysis of some of queer theory's foundational texts (or considered as such) and on the erasure of Anzaldúa's contributions to the elaboration of white queer theories but also on her use of the term "queer" through its articulation with some of the concepts she develops in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The challenge is also to disrupt, question and redefine queer thoughts and practices that, in France, were mainly developed from white US queer theories (thus reproducing blind spots in the analysis), and to intensify their scope starting from *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

Unsettling Dominant Narratives

In 1981, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga publish *This Bridge Called my Back*, where Anzaldúa's queer theorizing first occurs in a publication. From 1982 to 1986, Anzaldúa teaches summer courses in creative writing at the Women's Voices Writing Workshop at Oakes College at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). Teresa de Lauretis joins UCSC's history of consciousness department in 1985. In 1987, Anzaldúa publishes *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Later this year, the *Library Journal* selects *Borderlands/La Frontera* as one of the best thirty-eight books of 1987. In 1988, after applying unsuccessfully for the doctoral program of the UCSC's history of consciousness department, Anzaldúa is finally admitted in the doctoral program of literature². From April to

June 1988, she is appointed Distinguished Visiting Professor in Women's Studies at UCSC, where she teaches the course "Women of Color in the U.S.: Third World Feminism Theory and Literature" and an *historias* creative writing seminar.³ The various essays composing the 1991 special issue of *differences*, introduced and edited by Teresa de Lauretis, are produced in the context of a working conference on lesbian and gay sexualities that takes place in February 1990 at UCSC.

When formulating her queer theory, however, de Lauretis only briefly mentions Anzaldúa's work without even emphasizing her use of the term "queer" or discussing her work. The only mention of Anzaldúa's work in "Queer Theory" appears alongside the name of other queer of color writers during an overview that, above all, enables de Lauretis to contextualize her own work. Revisiting the stated goals of both the working conference and the special issue she edited, she recounts:

In this perspective, the work of the conference was intended to articulate the terms in which lesbian and gay sexualities may be understood and imaged as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture.

It was my hope that the conference would also problematize some of the discursive constructions and constructed silences in the emergent field of "gay and lesbian studies," and would further explore questions that have as yet been barely broached, such as the respective and/or common grounding of current discourses and practices of homo-sexualities in relation to gender and to race, with their attendant differences of class or ethnic culture, generational, geographical, and socio-political location. (de Lauretis iii-iv)

While stating she wants to counter dominant narratives by integrating the positionalities and epistemologies of queers of color, but also to problematize some of the constructed silences in the then emergent field of gay and lesbian studies, de Lauretis participates in the erasure of contributions by queers of color, of which Anzaldúa is only one example, to the development of queer theory, and avoids questioning her own practice. My purpose, then, is to deconstruct some of the constructed silences of queer theory, focusing in particular on the way in which erasure operates in some of queer theory's foundational texts.

(Our) Constructed Silences

I choose to focus my analysis on two important genealogical elements of queer theory, Teresa de Lauretis' "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities" (1991) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Queer and Now" (1993), for the direct relationship they maintain with Gloria Anzaldúa's work. In "Queer Theory," de Lauretis references *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *This Bridge Called My Back* but without mentioning that Gloria Anzaldúa (or Cherríe Moraga in "La Güera") uses the term "queer" in each of these two books, nor discussing her work in greater depth. At the same time, de Lauretis laments the fact that queers of color have not produced much theory and offers some explanations:

Surveying the writings of lesbians and gay men of color, one does not find a comparable amount of titles or authors. In part this is due to their restricted institutional access to publishing and higher education, which has only slightly improved in recent years with small presses and great effort.

But, besides the severe problem of institutional access, the relatively greater scarcity of works of theory by lesbians and gay of color may also have been a matter of different choices, different work priorities, different constituencies and forms of address. Perhaps, to a gay writer and critic of color, defining himself gay is not the utmost importance; he may have other and more pressing priorities in his work and his life. Perhaps a gay Chicano writer cannot identify with the white, middle-class gay community of the Castro for several reasons that are both socially and sexually overdetermined. (de Lauretis viii-ix)

I follow Evelyn Hammonds on her analysis of “Queer Theory” when she argues that while noting the problems due to their restricted access to publishing and higher education (but also to academic positions), de Lauretis ends up attributing the lack of knowledge of the experiences of queers of color to queers of color themselves, to their personal choices rather than to the institutional racism, heterosexism, and the structural inequalities that operate within US society and the university (303). My point is that, besides being “symptomatic of a disjuncture [...] between the stated goals of the special issue she edited and what it actually enacts” (Hammonds 304), de Lauretis’s essay is representative of a denial of the processes of erasure and epistemic violence that deeply structure queer theory. As Michael Hames-García reminds us in “Queer Theory Revisited,” despite their initial promise, most of the texts that are now considered foundational for queer theory introduce the issue of race-racism-racialization only to underscore the lack of critical work that has been produced by queers of color (24). Most of them portray queers of color as bringing additional considerations (and raw material) to the central issues of gender and sexuality, without themselves ever fully integrating an analysis of race and coloniality in their own frameworks (Hames-García 29). On the contrary, the issue of the articulations of race and coloniality to sexuality and gender

comes later and appears as a concern that queer theory intends to address (Hames-García 25). Both de Lauretis and Sedgwick's accounts "erase [queers] of color from the center of the debate in order to reintroduce them later at the margins of [queer] theory" (Hames-García 25) as this excerpt of "Queer and Now" indicates:

At the same time, a lot of the most exciting recent work around "queer" spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example. Intellectuals and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes "queer"—I think of an Isaac Julien, a Gloria Anzaldúa, a Richard Fung—are using the leverage of "queer" to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state. Thereby, the gravity (I mean the *gravitas*, the meaning, but also the *center* of gravity) of the term "queer" itself deepens and shifts. (Sedgwick, "Queer and Now" 8-9)

In "Queer and Now," through daring linguistic contortions, the works of "intellectuals and artists of color" are positioned as posterior and external to queer theory. Sedgwick is writing in 1993, and "La Prieta" (1981) or even *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) are far from being recent works. If Sedgwick recognizes that Anzaldúa clearly self-defines herself as queer and that her use shifts the center of gravity of the term and deepens it, she does so precisely through some temporal distortion. In both Sedgwick's and de Lauretis's accounts, queer theory seems to have been developed by white theorists without significant participation by queers of color with the consequence that genealogies can be written without any reference to their work (Hames-García 24-25).

As a result of those false chronologies and repeated erasures, queer of color writers—whose works have too often been ignored, underestimated, or marginalized in current genealogies—are systematically rendered silent and left unread. Such rewritings should at least be viewed with some suspicion regarding their political motivations and consequences.

We are the queer groups

What would a rewriting of queer theories starting from “La Prieta” and *Borderlands/La Frontera* look like? What political dimensions of “queer” have been erased at the same time as the references to works by queers of color and to Gloria Anzaldúa’s in particular? What “new” perspectives on queer theory does that alternative genealogy help reopen? What is at stake, indeed, in their erasure and in my rewriting?

Unlike the essays published in the special issue edited by de Lauretis, which rarely use the “queer” terminology she proposes as a discursive solution, I think that Anzaldúa’s use of the term categorically deserves our attention. “La Prieta” (1981), “El paisano is a bird of good omen” (1982), *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), “To (o) Queer the Writer” (1990), and the poems “The Occupant” (mid-70s) and “The Coming of the World Surdo” (1977) each highlight Anzaldúa’s formative role in the development of queer theories, particularly through her blurring and deconstruction of conventional gender roles, her lesbian feminist critique of heteronormativity, her reformulation of the notion of identity, the issue of political alliance-building and knowledge production. Her first use of the term “queer,” which appears in “La Prieta,” refers to her hormonal imbalance and to her subsequent early menstruations:

What my mother wanted in return for having birthed me and for nurturing me was that I submit to her without rebellion. Was this a survival skill she was trying to teach me? She objected not so much to my disobedience but to my questioning her right to demand obedience from me. Mixed with this power struggle was her guilt at having borne a child who was marked “con la seña,” thinking she had made me a victim of her sin. In her eyes and in the eyes of the others I saw myself reflected as “strange,” “abnormal,” “QUEER” (Anzaldúa, “La Prieta” 199).

Since the very beginning, her theorization of “queer” goes beyond sexual and gender identifications. For me, her understanding of it is actually inseparable from the way she seeks to reconfigure identity. She invites us to think in terms of processes of identification and disidentification, positionalities, and movement. “Queer” appears indeed as an identificatory category and as a positionality (both position and positioning) rather than as an identity or an anti-identity. In “La Prieta” as well as in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the term “queer” is often mobilized alongside other identificatory categories, differently marginalized (people of color, poor and working-class people, women, differently abled people, mestizas...):

This is not new.

Colored, poor white, latent queer

passing for white

seething with hatred, anger

unaware of its source

crazed with not knowing

who they are

choose me to pick at the masks (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 193)

Anzaldúa leads us to seek commonalities and suggests that those subjects are co-constructed and produced (even differently) as marginalized by the white heteropatriarchy, and, therefore, that their struggles and processes of resistance are inter-connected. It's an interpellation to become aware of the multiple and situated power relations that are exercised simultaneously (and distinctively) on the subjects. Indeed, it seems to me that Gloria Anzaldúa conceptualizes power as a "co-formation" or co-construction, a terminology developed by Paola Bacchetta ("Co-Formations" 5-6). In Anzaldúa's work, "queer" is always employed in a context that politicizes it explicitly by anchoring it in a decolonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist agenda.

Just as it is impossible to read *Borderlands/La Frontera* out of its feminist and decolonial context, it is difficult to grasp the construction of the queer-identified subject in Anzaldúa's work apart from that of the "new mestiza." Subjects who identify as queer are inclined to develop "la facultad" and function as "new mestizas" or "nepantleras," a particular type of mediators who facilitate the passages between the different worlds to which they belong and develop perspectives that allow them to reconfigure and transform these different spaces. This leads me to one of Anzaldúa's most precious contributions regarding queer theories: considering the queer-identified subject as an "atravesado," someone "who cross over, pass over, or go through" (*Borderlands* 25). She underscores being queer as a permanent crossing but also as bridging worlds. I find this spatial dimension particularly interesting: "queer" evokes above all a position and a positioning in space (a positionality), something "across," "oblique," "transversal," "non-straight" as suggested by its etymology,⁴ even before starting to mean "crooked," "twisted," or "fag":

We are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit *we are a threat*. Not all of us have the same oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other's oppressions. We do not have the same ideology, nor do we derive similar solutions. Some of us are leftists, some of us practitioners of magic. Some of us are both. But these different affinities are not opposed to each other. In *El Mundo Zurdo* I with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet. (Anzaldúa, "La Prieta" 209)

The queer-identified subjects, if they choose to function as nepantleras, to let their back be bridges and reinvest the strategic space of the borderlands, constitute these points of articulation and connectivity. Understood as a "mode of identification as relational as it is oblique" (Muñoz 127), especially with oppressions that may not be ours but are interconnected with ours, or as a mode of perception (a possible reading of the fiction "El paisano is a bird of good omen"), more than an identity, the term "queer" and the subjects it encompasses marks a field of connections, emotional, erotic and political, but also of affirmation of the difference within. *El Mundo Zurdo* represents the multiple spaces (always on the making) of community building based on affinities and commonalities rather than on similarities, which aims collectively at a revolutionary change. I think that one of Anzaldúa's most important contributions lies in the possibility of re-signifying differences as the principle for constructing inclusive and multi-issued alliances. Queer theories, in my understanding of Anzaldúa's work, are "theories in the flesh," theories "where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings

– all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (Anzaldúa and Moraga 19), deeply engaged in or with grassroots activism.

My belief is that queer theory’s current genealogies, by erasing the contributions of Gloria Anzaldúa (and that of many other queers of color), contribute, above all, to the erasure of the anti-racist and anti-imperialist agenda that emerged alongside queer theories, uprooting the term from its decolonial context, from lesbians of color politics, and from a radical understanding of power in terms of co-formation, breaking the possibilities to create multi-issue and expansive coalitions.

May my work be a bridge.

Notes

¹ A similar point is made by Paola Bacchetta, Jules Falquet, and Norma Alarcón in the introduction to *Les Cahiers du Cedref* (Introduction 10).

² Anzaldúa will eventually be awarded her PhD posthumously. For more information on her dissertation project, see Keating, “Editor’s Introduction: Re-envisioning Coyolxauhqui, Decolonizing Reality”.

³ All of the details highlighting Gloria Anzaldúa’s life come from the meticulous and illuminating timeline that AnaLouise Keating provides at the end of *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*.

⁴ As Sedgwick notes: “the word ‘queer’ itself means *across* – it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*” (Sedgwick, *Tendencies* xii).

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