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## **MAKING OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE, MAKING STANDPOINT: A JOURNEY INTO GLORIA ANZALDÚA'S BORDERLANDS**

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**Theresa A. Martinez**

Department of Sociology, University of Utah, Salt Lake City,  
Utah, USA

*The theory of oppositional culture, as discussed by Bonnie Mitchell and Joe Feagin (1995), suggests that African Americans, American Indians, and Mexican Americans draw on their own cultural resources to resist domination. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that Black women develop a unique vision of the social world based on their position within a matrix of domination that organizes intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender, among others. Expression of this unique vision or standpoint, however, is rendered problematic within a matrix of domination organized via four domains of power—the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal (Collins 2000). This article suggests that Gloria Anzaldúa's writing—her storytelling, narratives, and poetry—is a significant form of oppositional culture and contributes to the achievement of a Chicana feminist standpoint within a matrix of domination as Anzaldúa shares tales of living in the borderlands. The paper provides a brief analysis of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Theorists in the sociology of racial and ethnic relations have for some time focused on the ways people of color resist and survive

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the late Gloria Anzaldúa whose work inspired and enlightened this article. Thanks also go out to Bonnie Mitchell, Joe Feagin, and Patricia Hill Collins. Finally, I would like to wholeheartedly express my thanks to three excellent reviewers for making this journey possible.

Address correspondence to Theresa A. Martinez, Department of Sociology, University of Utah, 380 South 1530 East, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA. E-mail: [theresa.martinez@soc.utah.edu](mailto:theresa.martinez@soc.utah.edu)

oppression. Bonnie Mitchell and Joe Feagin (1995) argue that African Americans, American Indians, and Mexican Americans draw on their own cultures to resist oppression, describing *oppositional cultures* among people of color (Mitchell and Feagin 1995; Stuckey 1987; Scott 1990). Patricia Hill Collins argues that a collective standpoint emerged among Black women as the result of struggle within a matrix of domination that organizes intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, among others. Collins further describes the matrix of domination as organized “via four domains of power, namely, the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal” (2000, p. 276). Collins notes that a collective Black feminist standpoint has been upheld in the tradition of the blues singers, the autobiographers, the poets, and the storytellers.

This article includes both oppositional culture theory and standpoint theory and suggests that Gloria Anzaldúa’s narratives, stories, and poetry in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, are a significant expression of oppositional culture and her “scholarly activism” (Gonzalez 1998, p. 61) contributes to the achievement of a Chicana feminist standpoint. Moreover, Anzaldúa’s writing is an act of opposition within the structural, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power as she “constructs new knowledge” (Collins 2000, pp. 284, 286) in the borderlands. This article, then, contributes to literature in the sociology of racial and ethnic relations as well as feminist research in sociology. In addition, Anzaldúa’s narratives are reminiscent of the work of early sociologists who relayed theoretical perspectives through the use of narratives and stories. These sociologists produced works of “nonfiction social science as well as fiction, including sociologically informed novels” (Deegan 1997, p. 2; in this context see Martineau 1886; Du Bois 1911/1989, 1928/1989, 1928/1995; and Gilman 1997, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Gloria Anzaldúa’s work exists within a collective, a community of Chicana feminist writers who often analyze, refer to, and comment on her work, especially her book *Borderlands*. Examples of these will be cited throughout the article. Yet, where sociologists review Anzaldúa’s work, *Borderlands* is largely overlooked (Pierce 1982; Segura and Pesquera 1992). A notable exception is Norman Denzin (1997) who, interestingly, explores Anzaldúa’s feminist

<sup>1</sup>There is an obvious difference between the work of Anzaldúa and that of Du Bois, Gilman, and Martineau, in that, Anzaldúa is not a sociologist nor is she making an obvious attempt to convey specifically sociological concepts in her writing. I believe it is my task in this manuscript to take Anzaldúa’s narratives, stories, and poetry and convey their contribution to the discipline of sociology.

writings along with those of Patricia Hill Collins and Trinh T. Minh-ha in an examination of "standpoint epistemologists." While Denzin's work is a beginning, this paper seeks to help redress the general omission of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* in the sociological literature.

### ***AN OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE AND A SHARED ANGLE OF VISION***

Stories of European invasion and the systematic domination and subjugation of non-European peoples make up our nation's history as white European privilege was accomplished via systematic usurpation of social, economic, and political power over American Indians, African Americans, and Mexican Americans, by force of advanced technology and firepower (Blauner 1972; Zinn 1990). At the same time, African Americans, American Indians, and Mexican Americans caught within this exploitative hegemony did not suffer oppression silently and without expression. In fact, oppressed groups developed specific methods of resistance.

Bonnie Mitchell and Joe Feagin (1995; see also Scott 1990, Hechter 1975, 1978; Martinez 1997; Feagin 2000) describe a theory of *oppositional culture* or culture of resistance suggesting that subjugated groups will resist oppression by drawing on their own cultural resources. According to Mitchell and Feagin, subjugated groups will generate a "culture of resistance" that represents "a coherent set of values, beliefs, and practices which mitigates the effects of oppression and reaffirms that which is distinct from the majority culture" (Mitchell and Feagin 1995, p. 68). Mitchell and Feagin suggest that oppositional cultures operate to preserve dignity and autonomy, to provide an alternative construction of identity (one not based entirely on deprivation), and to give members of the dominant group an insightful critique of their own culture. From this perspective, members of oppressed subordinate groups are not powerless pawns that merely react to circumstances beyond their control, but rather are reflective, creative agents that construct a separate reality in which to survive. (Mitchell and Feagin 1995, p. 69)

For oppressed groups, Mitchell and Feagin assert, oppositional culture can mean everything from the creation and expansion of extensive kinship networks that survive even in the face of harsh economic realities, to the organization of civil rights movements that center group efforts around seeking legal redress for discrimination, to employing cultural products for uses other than those intended by the producers, to creating artistic and cultural expressions via various mediums that describe in voice, dance, or visualization either

cultural pride or protest and critique of the dominant culture (1995, p. 70). In fact, Mitchell and Feagin emphasize that much oppositional culture is a people's use of "their own art and music, and their own philosophical and political thinking about oppression and liberation" (Mitchell and Feagin 1995, p. 73; see also Collins 1991, p. 10 and Feagin 2000).<sup>2</sup>

Patricia Hill Collins describes a unique version of feminist standpoint theory (see also Hartsock 1987; Harding 1987) asserting that an Afrocentric feminist standpoint emerged from Black women's historic group location within intersecting oppressions (2000, pp. 24–25), which reflected "living as both African-Americans and women and, in many cases, in poverty" (1991, p. 29). For Collins, a Black feminist standpoint is "a shared angle of vision . . . a collective, focused, group consciousness . . . tapping sources of everyday, unarticulated consciousness that have traditionally been denigrated in white, male-controlled institutions" (1991, p. 26). Moreover, Collins states that an "articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint is key to Black women's survival" within "intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation" (2000, pp. 36, 202). According to Collins, an Afrocentric feminist standpoint has been upheld in the tradition of the autobiographers, poets, blues singers, and storytellers who help fend off "hegemonic ideas" as they craft "counter-hegemonic knowledge that fosters changed consciousness" (2000, pp. 15, 258, 285; for other contributions to the Black feminist tradition see also Wallace 1978; Dill 1979, 1988; Gilkes 1980, 1982, 1983; Davis 1981, 1989; hooks 1981, 1989; Smith 1982; and Lorde 1984, 1995; Stewart in Richardson 1987).

It is also the storytellers in social science who have carried on a tradition of linking concrete experience to social theory. W.E.B. Du Bois exemplifies this approach in narrative form as he combines fiction and non-fiction to convey a sociological understanding and description of the Black experience in America (1903/1995). Du Bois suggests that Blacks' experience of oppression yielded "no true self-consciousness," but instead a "double-consciousness" described by Du Bois as "two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged

<sup>2</sup>It is essential to note that Mitchell and Feagin are referring to a broad definition of "culture" in this instance, by not reducing it to music, dance, and literary works. Culture, as used by Mitchell and Feagin, refers to all forms of human expression and articulation and includes life practices and belief systems that emerge within a culture (Williams 1958). See George Lipsitz (1988) for a discussion of Ivory Perry, a political activist from the Civil Rights era who was committed to racial justice through resistance and oppositional culture. See also Frederick Erickson (1987) for a discussion of oppositional cultural patterns developed by minority students in response to negative encounters with teachers and repeated failures in school.

strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (1903/1995, p. 45). Charlotte Perkins Gilman also combines fiction and non-fiction in her work to convey sociological concepts and theories. In the novel *With Her in Ourland: Sequel to Herland*, Gilman produces a sequel to a feminist utopian fantasy—*Herland*—by confronting in *Ourland* the very concrete issues facing women in American society in her lifetime (Gilman 1997, 1999). The concrete issues Gilman discusses include some that still confront women today—lack of voting power, lack of quality and affordable child care, economic dependency on men, the imposed burden of housework, “dysfunctional housing,” and “ridiculous clothing” (Deegan 1997, p. 44). Gilman was influenced by social theories that stressed equality between the sexes and produced in *Ourland* a “sociologically informed critique” of sexism in American society (Deegan 1999, p. 1).

It is the central argument of this paper that Gloria Anzaldúa’s narratives, stories, and poetry—demonstrative of her philosophical and political thinking—in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) represent a viable form of oppositional culture as her work provides oppressors with what Mitchell and Feagin would describe as “an insightful critique of their own culture” (Mitchell and Feagin 1995, p. 69; see also Martinez 1999). It is also this article’s suggestion that Anzaldúa’s writing contributes to the achievement of a “shared angle of vision” among Chicana feminists whose standpoint also emerged from a historic location within intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class, among others. Anzaldúa’s narratives and stories contribute to “new knowledge” on the borderlands, countering “interrelated domains of power” within a matrix of domination (Collins 2000, p. 276).

### ***A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF ANALYSIS***

Lofland and Lofland suggest that, “analysis is conceived as an emergent product of a process of gradual induction . . . analysis is also very much a creative act” that is a way of framing one’s “data” (1995, pp. 181–182). The following is a brief content analysis of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, in the tradition of feminist qualitative content analysis. According to Reinharz, feminist content analysis of texts has included feminist non-fiction, of which Anzaldúa’s work is an example (1992, p. 146). Moreover, while this analysis is viewed through the lens of race relations theory in sociology—the theory of oppositional culture—it is well within feminist tradition in its use of standpoint theory. Anzaldúa’s non-fictional oppositional culture “exposes pervasive patriarchal and even misogynist culture”—a hallmark of feminist content analysis

of cultural products (Reinharz 1992, p. 147). In seeking to discover Anzaldúa's unique understanding of the dominant society, the Chicano/a community, and her life, I carefully read and reread her work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, seeking themes in Anzaldúa's work while guided by the theory of oppositional culture in the sociology of racial and ethnic relations, and feminist standpoint theory in sociology. As Reinharz asserts, "...qualitative sociologists apply an inductive, interpretive framework to cultural artifacts. What differentiates sociologists from historians is simply the use of sociological theory as an aid in the explanation" (1992, p. 159).

***THE WORK OF GLORIA ANZALDÚA: A VOICE  
IN OPPOSITION, A CONTRIBUTION TO STANDPOINT***

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, as demonstrated by this brief interpretive analysis, centers around selected key themes. While other themes could have been included in this analysis, including Anzaldúa's discussion of goddesses in Aztec-Mexica history, I narrowed the discussion to only two. The two themes include: articulation of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the borderlands; and articulation of the birth of a "*mestiza* consciousness" within the framework of writing as an act of opposition. Both themes reflect an oppositional culture within multiple domains of power, and both contribute to the achievement of a Chicana feminist standpoint.

In her descriptions of injustices along the U.S-Mexican border, and in her discussions of intersecting oppressions in the borderlands, Anzaldúa's narratives and stories provide insightful critiques of dominant culture, critiques that were ripe for development, according to Mitchell and Feagin, in that, "the greater the barriers to structural assimilation in the economy and polity, the more likely elements of a culture of opposition and resistance develop and persist" (1995, p. 69). Moreover, Anzaldúa's stories of sexist practices among Chicanos as well as the homophobia extant in Chicana/o culture, also provide insightful critiques of dominant groups as outlined by Mitchell and Feagin. In this context, however, the "dominant groups" Anzaldúa confronts are the sexist men and the homophobic men and women in the Chicana/o community who perpetuate intersecting oppressions of gender and sexuality. Further, Anzaldúa's message of social critique has significance for multiple domains of power within the matrix of domination described by Collins—the structural, hegemonic, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains (2000, p. 276).

***Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in the Borderlands***

Anzaldúa's storytelling, narratives, and poetry articulate an oppositional consciousness as they describe intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality and her work resonates with that of other Chicana academics (Nieto-Gómez 1971, 1976; Cotera 1976; del Castillo 1977, 1990; Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981; Baca Zinn 1982; Zavella 1984, 1987; Garcia 1989, 1990; Córdova 1990, 1994, 1998; Trujillo 1991; Perez 1991, 1993; Castañeda 1992; Rebolledo and Rivero 1993; López 1993; de la Torre and Pesquera 1993; Flores-Ortiz 1995; Castillo 1995; Ruiz 1999). Anzaldúa poignantly recreates a history of her people and her family and injustices along the U.S.-Mexican border, recreating in narratives and poetry the "legal" deception that led to the loss of Mexican land to whites. She describes the experience of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans who suffer deportation and extreme exploitation. She expresses the alienation and horror of those Mexicans living within the U.S. along the border with Texas. Anzaldúa remarks, then, on sexism both outside her community and inside her community. And finally, she describes the homophobic responses of her own community, a community in which she experiences acute joy and acute pain, a community to which she belongs but within which she rebels, a community where she experiences the fear of "going home."

Teresa Córdova suggests that when women of color speak out about their history, their past, their culture "people will say to us, *You are destroying harmony. We were fine until you started raising these issues*" (Córdova 1998, p. 36). Moreover, she argues, members of the dominant group will attempt to determine how people of color may express "legitimate resistance" (1998, p. 41). In her writing, Anzaldúa refuses to tread carefully and instead insists with Córdova that "our history, our literature, our cosmology, our knowledge should be legitimate knowledge" (Córdova 1998, p. 41). In this way, Anzaldúa takes the step toward what Córdova would describe as "control of defining what constitutes legitimate resistance" (1998, p. 41). For Anzaldúa, the first step to defining resistance begins on the U.S.-Mexican border.

***On the U.S.-Mexican Border, El Otro Mexico***

*A Border History*

Entering into her Chicana past, Anzaldúa recounts the history of her people. She writes, "... I identified as 'Raza' before I identified as



'mexicana' or "Chicana" (1987, p. 62).<sup>3</sup> Anzaldúa centers her early discussion of history on the southwestern Indian tribes of the U.S. who, she argues, traveled south from the "historical/mythological Aztlán" to the valley of Mexico a thousand years before the Christian Era where they became the "parent culture to the Aztecs" (1987, pp. 10, 4; Rodriguez and Gonzales 1999). She moves, then, to the coming of Cortes and the Spanish conquest. From that vantage, her writing focuses on the *mestiza/o*—the blending of Spanish and Indian cultures. Given her earlier discussion of the Indian tribes of the Southwest, Anzaldúa emphasizes that when the conquistadors journeyed north from the valley of Mexico, it was a return home for the Indian and the *mestizo*.

For every gold hungry conquistador and soul-hungry missionary who came north from Mexico, ten to twenty Indians and *mestizos* went along as porters or in other capacities. *For the Indians, this constituted a return to the place of origin, Aztlan, thus making Chicanos originally and secondarily indigenous to the southwest.* (1987, p. 5, my emphasis)

Here Anzaldúa blurs the boundaries between *Indio* and Chicano, as Chicanas/os and/or Mexicans are a mixture of Indian and Spanish blood reminiscent of older notions of the "Aztecas del norte" (1987, p. 1; Gonzales and Rodriguez 2000). She emphasizes the continuous marriage between and among groups: "Indians and *mestizos* from central Mexico intermarried with North American Indians. The continual marriage between Mexican and American Indians and Spaniards formed an even greater *mestizaje*" (1987, p. 5).

The blurring of boundaries that Anzaldúa attempts in her narrative of bloodlines and borders, is an oppositional stance and challenge to popular mythology concerning Mexicans and Chicanas/os within the hegemonic domain of power. Mitchell and Feagin suggest that part of Mexican American oppositional culture has been the longstanding work of Chicana/o activists to articulate "an oppositional ideology," accenting "the ancient presence of Mexican culture and people on southwestern soil" (1995, p. 79). In addition, Anzaldúa challenges stereotypes that emerge in what Collins describes as the

<sup>3</sup>In this context Chicano/a refers to men and women from Mexican American background. Latino/a is an umbrella term of choice rather than Hispanic (which refers to both Mexicans and Mexican Americans). Another term frequently used in the text will be the term *mestiza/o* which refers to persons of mixed Spanish and Indian heritage and can be used synonymously with Chicano/as.



hegemonic domain of power which shapes consciousness “via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols and ideologies” (2000, pp. 285, 284). This method of “manufacturing ideologies” is apparent in American culture in popular notions that Mexicans are “aliens” and “brown hordes,” that is, intruders on a glorified American way of life. This common racist mentality among Americans is often reflected in epithets like “Mexicans go home” and “Mexicans should go back to where you came from” (Gonzales and Rodriguez 2000). Anzaldúa’s narratives contribute to longstanding activism and defy this popular American mythology as she clearly suggests that the original homeland of Chicana/os is the American southwest; therefore, Mexicans who reside in the United States are living in their original homeland. Anzaldúa’s stories, then, construct “new knowledge” about the history of the borderlands, (Collins 2000, p. 286).

### *A Tale of Texas*

Moving forward in historical time to the 1800s, Anzaldúa notes that Anglos were illegally entering Mexican territory in Texas where the battle over the Alamo mission would become a rallying cry for Texas independence won in 1835–1836, a confrontation which would ultimately lead to the U.S-Mexican War. Beginning in 1836 above the Nueces River and for ten long years, the settlements south and west of the Nueces would experience the “trauma of war and annexation” including “forced marches, general dispossession, and random violence” (Montejano 1987, p. 27). David Montejano outlines several complex causes for the war including “slaveholder interests, land-hungry frontiersman, belief in Manifest Destiny, the Polk-Stockton intrigue, and so on . . .” (1987, p. 15). Following the war and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Montejano suggests, “Mexicans in Texas . . . lost considerable land through outright confiscation and fraud” (1987, p. 50). While the Treaty upheld the Mexican citizens right to land grants, Texas, in fact, claimed to be exempt from the treaty and pursued its own deliberations of “alleged” Mexican land grants (1987, p. 38). Those who were not part of the Mexican elite suffered many injustices.<sup>4</sup> David Montejano notes that an English lady who spent time on a Texas ranch in the 1880s, wrote in her journal “that it was difficult to convince Texans that Mexicans were human . . . [The Mexican] is treated like a dog, or, perhaps, not so well” (1987, p. 83).

<sup>4</sup>David Montejano stresses that the Mexican elite and the Anglo elite would forge bonds through marriage and *compadrazgo* or sponsorship through “baptisms, confirmations, or marriages” (1987, p. 37).

Anzaldúa refers to the loss of Mexican land grants when she writes that the land belonging to many poor Mexicans “annexed by conquest along with the land... was soon swindled away from its owners... stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it” (1987, p. 7). Anzaldúa describes her own grandmother’s losses during the land grab in her mother’s words: “‘A smart *gabacho* [white] lawyer took the land away mamá hadn’t paid taxes. No *hablaba inglés* [she didn’t speak English], she didn’t know how to ask for time to raise the money’” (1987, p. 8). Later, large agribusinesses would buy out the remaining land, land her family and other Mexican American families had “toiled over... or had been used communally by them” (1987, p. 9). Anzaldúa herself witnesses her family’s land cleared of all vegetation while her father was forced to become a sharecropper paying forty percent of his earnings to the Rio Farms. Her family worked “three successive Rio farms,” one being a chicken farm where she and her mother handled eggs. She writes: “For years afterwards I couldn’t stomach the sight of an egg” (1987, p. 9).

The injustices Mexicans suffered at the hands of Anglos in Texas are a significant core issue for Anzaldúa as she focuses on the treatment of Mexicanas/os on the border. Anzaldúa speaks from the standpoint of an Anglo mercenary in the poem, “We Call Them Greasers.” While this is not necessarily a personal story, the reader can’t help flinching at the brutal imagery Anzaldúa creates in the poem. In the Anglo mercenary’s voice she speaks of the contempt whites had for Mexicans when they came to Mexican territory, how whites “waved” a fraying piece of paper at families to convince them that they hadn’t paid taxes and were required to leave—a nasty deceptive device. The Anglo mercenary’s voice mocks those Mexicans who attempt to fight the frayed piece of paper in court. “It was a laughing stock/them not even knowing English. Still some refused to budge, even after we burned them out” (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 134). The story then takes a ruthless turn as the Texan and his men single out a particular couple who wouldn’t “budge” and tells in graphic language the violence with which they visited them. In the poem we read the mercenary’s own account of raping the woman and ordering her husband to be lynched. In this context the lynching as well as the rape become tools of domination based on race as well as gender.

Angela Davis also emphasizes the intersection of race and gender within the context of sexual violence: “It would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men’s sexual urges... Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to

extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men" (1981, p. 23). Similarly, bell hooks stresses the use of rape as a tool of repression under slavery: "Rape was a common method of torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women. The threat of rape or physical brutalization inspired terror in the psyches of displaced African females" (1981, p. 18).

Anzaldúa's use of her own personal biography to describe the injustices suffered by her family in Texas, and her use of poetry to convey a history of the Mexican people in the American southwest that is characterized by legal deception, rape, and lynching, are forthright critiques of oppressors within the structural and the interpersonal domains of power described by Collins. Collins suggests that the structural domain of power "encompasses how social institutions are organized to reproduce" the subordination of people of color (2000, p. 277), while the interpersonal domain of power "functions through routinized, day-to-day practices of how people treat one another" (2000, p. 287). In Anzaldúa's narrative, the interlocking social institutions that produce "unjust results" in the structural domain of power are the government and the legal system who collude to allow the confiscation of Mexican land grants. The interpersonal domain of power is exemplified in Anzaldúa's poem about the Anglo mercenary and his men whose brutal behavior demonstrates the day-to-day injustices and vicious treatment of Mexicans in the southwest (Barrera 1979).

In addition, Anzaldúa's use of poetry is reflective of the use of fiction among people of color to resist domination. Mitchell and Feagin refer to the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez as a cultural signifier of resistance. According to Mitchell and Feagin, Garcia Marquez emphasizes the relevance of emotional, nonrational qualities of life and physical matter and argues that European Americans develop logic at the expense of the "intuitive aspects of life" resulting in "unbalanced, unhealthy perspectives" (1995, pp. 80–81). Anzaldúa's poetry seems also to be a powerful signifier of oppositional consciousness and resistance as she documents the illegal acts of European Americans in the borderlands, contributing to a Chicana standpoint on the history of Texas. In particular, Sonia Saldívar views Anzaldúa's work as an "important revision of Texas history," suggesting that "[t]hrough issues of gender politics Anzaldúa locates personal history within the history of the border people" (1991, p. 212). Saldívar reinforces the notion that Anzaldúa's work has significance for the "hegemonic domain of power." Saldívar insists that Anzaldúa's "border feminism" resides "in a space not acknowledged by hegemonic culture" that "resists genre boundaries as well as geopolitical borders" (1991, pp. 210, 211).

Further, Anzaldúa's use of biography and fiction to convey injustices and atrocities committed by Anglos in Texas, is evocative of a tradition among sociologists who used fictional works to convey sociological meanings (See Martineau 1886; Du Bois 1911/1989, 1928/1989; Gilman 1997, 1999). Mary Jo Deegan asserts that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "tales are fictional representations of Gilman's sociology" (1997, p. 42). Deegan asserts that Gilman "transformed sociology into fiction by using her feminist epistemology to generate a . . . set of principles for ordering action in her writings" (1997, p. 42). Among those principles Gilman chose to order the action in her fiction was her insistence on drawing "on her female experience" and exhibiting "penetrating insight in her critique of the patriarchal discourses" of her day (Deegan 1997, pp. 42, 46). In the same way, Anzaldúa's use of biography and fiction draws on her personal experience as a Chicana in Texas and offers incisive insights into a historical context in Texas characterized by oppression within the structural and interpersonal domains of power.

#### *Without Documents*

Anzaldúa also discusses the harsh treatment of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the Southwest. The story she invokes speaks of crossing borders under the watchful eyes of "[h]unters in army-green uniforms"—the Border Patrol. Anzaldúa tells us that the "life span of a Mexican farm laborer is 56" (1987, p. 90) and stresses that,

Those who make it past the checking points of the Border Patrol find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism in Chicano barrios in the Southwest and in big northern cities. Living in a no-man's-borderland, caught between being treated as criminals and being able to eat, between resistance and deportation, the illegal refugees are some of the poorest and the most exploited of any people in the U.S. (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 12)

And what of the women who cross the border? Anzaldúa candidly documents racist, classist, and sexist practices on the U.S.-Mexican border when she writes about the economic and sexual exploitation as well as sexual abuse of undocumented Mexican immigrant women by "coyotes"—a widely known and even routinized practice on the border. She writes, "The Mexican woman is especially at risk. Often the coyote . . . doesn't feed her for days or let her go to the bathroom. Often he rapes her or sells her into prostitution" (1987, p. 12).

Collins discusses related issues with regard to the exploitation of African American women in the U.S. when she maintains that under U.S. capitalist class relations “Black women’s bodies have been objectified and commodified” as well as exploited “[v]ia mechanisms such as employment discrimination” and “maintaining images of Black women that construct them as mules or objects of pleasure” (2000, p. 132). In this way, Collins asserts, “Black women’s labor” and sexuality have been exploited (2000, p. 132). Moreover, according to Collins, “[r]ape and other acts of overt violence that Black women have experienced . . . are the visible dimensions of a more generalized, routinized system of oppression” (2000, p. 146) in the United States. Collins stresses, in fact, that “Black women’s experiences with . . . prostitution and rape constitute specific cases of how more powerful groups have aimed to regulate Black women’s bodies” and such cases “emphasize the connections between sexual ideologies developed to justify actual social practices and the use of force to maintain the social order” (2000, p. 135).

Anzaldúa further argues that one needn’t have been an undocumented Mexican immigrant to suffer the harsh conditions on the border. Both the “Repatriation Program” and “Operation Wetback” episodes in our nation’s history were mass deportations of Mexican Americans as well as Mexicans. One only needed to “look” Mexican to be picked up and deported to Mexico (Acuña 1988, p. 267). Anzaldúa writes about her uncle Pedro who was working in the fields with his family when *la migra*—the INS—came. Gloria’s aunt, Pedro’s wife, warns him not to run because *la migra* will think he is “*del otro lao*”—from the other side of the border. Her uncle is terrified and he runs. He is deported to Guadalajara despite the fact that he is fifth generation American. Anzaldúa writes, “He tried to smile when he looked back at us, to raise his fist. But I saw the shame pushing his head down, I saw the terrible weight of shame hunch his shoulders” (1987, p. 4).

Once again Anzaldúa’s use of historical narrative and personal biography carry a note of resistance and critique within the structural and the hegemonic domains of power. As Collins notes, American institutions within the structural domain of power can work to exclude and discriminate against people of color supporting “a host of punitive policies that reinscribe social hierarchies of race and gender” (2000, p. 279). In Anzaldúa’s narratives, the institutions most implicated in the story of the undocumented workers and Chicanas/os are the U.S. government through its official border policies and the labor market through employer practices. Undocumented Mexican workers, Anzaldúa suggests, are the most exploited

group, fearing coyotes, employers in the U.S., and border authorities (Conover 1987). Chicanas/os are also implicated in this border discussion as they are often stereotyped and deported at will by the INS. Anzaldúa's critique of racist practices in border policies are expanded in her pointed description of the exploitation of Mexican women who cross the border, women who are often starved and raped by predators. In her narratives, then, Anzaldúa constructs a critique of oppressive racist and sexist institutional practices on the border.

At the same time, Anzaldúa's narratives on the undocumented are based on her own personal and family experience with *la migra* in the fields; they are written with an obvious compassion for those who suffer the injustices on the U.S.-Mexican border—those mainly unsung and forgotten individuals who cross the borders daily. Through her narratives, Anzaldúa offers what Mitchell and Feagin describe as “an alternative construction of identity” (1995, p. 69) for undocumented Mexican workers on the U.S.-Mexican border. Where common American stereotypes place these workers in the category of “wetbacks,” “illegal aliens,” and “sub-humans,” Anzaldúa's narrative descriptions offer an oppositional story, documenting a very different description of undocumented Mexican workers as hard-working and industrious men and women who endure unimaginable hardships only to become marginal employees within an American economic system that is cruelly exploitative of them.

In a similar manner, the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois uses personal biography and historical narrative to explore intersecting oppressions. Du Bois describes an initiation into the ways of racism as a very young boy growing up in New England where a young girl—a newcomer to his school—peremptorily refuses his gift card during an exchange in class. This experience taught him that he “was different from the others,” and moreover, that he was “shut out from their world by a vast veil” (1955, p. 44) which would literally close the doors of both friendship and opportunity. Further, Du Bois' historical narrative in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1995) maps a history of Black choices in America as circumscribed early by the peculiar institution of slavery and later by slavery's aftermath when Black opportunities would again be limited by what would amount to virtual serfdom where their “powers of body and mind” would be “strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten” (1995, p. 46). Du Bois' biography and narrative, then, serve as profound critiques of the history of systemic racism in this country practiced against Black Americans. In the same way, Anzaldúa's narratives also serve as a critique of domination for Chicanas/os, as she, like Du Bois, seeks “to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important” (Collins 2000, pp. 285, 100).



*Intersecting Oppressions Both Within and Without**Racism, Classism, and Sexism*

There are an assortment of European, Anglo, and white racist, sexist, and classist figures in Anzaldúa's writing. For Anzaldúa, subjugation began with Hernán Cortes closely followed by the conquistadors. Anglo figures in Texas then become the oppressive figures and part of the struggle against sexism, racism, and class domination (see the Texan mercenary in the poem, "We Call Them Greasers," 1987, pp. 134–35). Soon thereafter, Anzaldúa decries the actions of powerful landowners, wealthy growers, American conglomerates and factory owners. All of these, we can infer, are led by wealthy white men. At some point, Anzaldúa speaks directly to the figure of the "gringo" or "dominant white culture" as she writes, "Gringo, accept the doppelganger in your psyche. By taking back your collective shadow the intracultural split will heal" (1987, p. 86).<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, for Anzaldúa, struggles with racism, classism, and sexism are global. The woman of color, she asserts, is hunted by all men. Anzaldúa often refers to the "dark-skinned woman" and the "India" or "India-mestiza" as the one who is wounded by dominant white culture and by all men. Anzaldúa writes, "The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage . . . For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people" (1987, p. 22). This allusion to the indigenous woman, the *india*, in Anzaldúa's writing mirrors the usage among Chicana feminist writers such as Norma Alarcón, who suggests that *mestiza* and Indian women represent "the surpluses of cheap labor in the field, the canneries, the *maquiladora* border industries, and domestic service" (1998, p. 375). Moreover, Alarcón contends that Anzaldúa and other Chicana writers who evoke the image of the indigenous woman do so in an "effort to pluralize the racialized body by redefining part of their experience through the reappropriation of

<sup>5</sup>Anzaldúa rarely mentions white women in the course of her text. However, it is instructive and significant to note that she is inclusive of the white woman or *gabacha* as a critical player in the "borderlands" poem (1987, pp. 194–195). This is not a casual mention on Anzaldúa's part, as the "borderlands" poem encapsulates so much of Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness. That is, Anzaldúa attempts to include all players in the human drama with the admonition that to live in the borderlands, one must "live *sin fronteras*"—without borders. While the omission of white women in the narrative may seem strange to readers, it can also be understood as a Chicana seeking to construct and reconstruct truly gaping absences of Chicana thought in academic and public discourse. Patricia Hill Collins' influential work *Black Feminist Thought* (1991, 2000), while referring to the work of white feminists and thinkers, relies almost entirely on the work of black women writers, blues singers, and poets.



‘the’ native woman on Chicana feminist terms.” This reappropriation “marked one of the first assaults on male-centered cultural nationalism on one hand . . . and patriarchal political economy on the other.” For Alarcón, Anzaldúa, who has invoked the “dark Beast”—the racist, classist, and sexist practices both within and outside the Chicana/o culture—is in the vanguard of the assault (1998, p. 375; see also Saldívar 1991, p. 211).

Further, Anzaldúa’s narratives describe the sexism she sees within her own culture. She stresses that Chicano/a culture has rigid gender roles where “males make the rules and laws” and “women transmit them” (1987, p. 16). “The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males . . . Women are made to feel like total failures if they don’t marry and have children” (1987, p. 17). Yet, women are also told to be strong—a mixed message at best. A rebellious woman who defies this structure is considered a “*mujer mala*”—a bad woman. One senses that Anzaldúa rebelled early. “There is a rebel in me . . . It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed . . . So, don’t give me your tenets and laws. Don’t give me your lukewarm Gods” (1987, pp. 16, 22).

Men in the culture, on the other hand, according to Anzaldúa, experience shame at the hands of the dominant group which produces “false” machismo, which she describes as “an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem” and “the result of hierarchical male dominance” (1987, p. 83). This “false” machismo, she asserts, also leads to brutality toward women. Similarly, Elizabeth Martinez asserts, “Our history as a people of Mexican origin began with hemispheric rape, and we carry in us, consciously or not, the idea that to be conquered is to be *chingado* (screwed); that to become unconquered requires dominating—even screwing—others” (Martinez 1998, p. 128). Martinez tires of this “*chingón* politics” and suggests that, “We have thought too little about how racism and sexism are interrelated, reinforcing structures in a system that identifies domination with castration, that quite literally casts politics in sexual metaphor” (Martinez 1998, p. 128). Similarly, Anzaldúa argues that the struggle of the *mestiza* is “above all a feminist one” (1987, p. 84), that is, to take apart the damaging images created by the sexist culture she describes.

Collins describes similar issues within the Black community suggesting that some Black men “accept prevailing notions of both Black and White masculinity” (2000, p. 153). Citing Beale, Collins notes that Black men see “‘the system for what it really is for the most part, but where [the Black man] rejects its values and mores on many issues, he seems to take his guidelines from the pages of the *Ladies*

*Home Journal*” (Beale in Collins 2000, p. 153). Collins also mentions Michelle Wallace as one of the few African American women who have “directly challenged” Black men who accept these sexist notions of masculinity (2000, p. 154). bell hooks echoes this concern with sexism in the Black community as a reflection of general sexism in American culture as she writes, “Black males, utterly disenfranchised in almost every arena of life in the United States, often find that the assertion of sexist domination is their only expressive access to the patriarchal power they are told all men should possess as their gendered birthright” (hooks 1994, p. 110).

Anzaldúa turns to historical narrative to critique a combination of racist, classist, and sexist practices carried out by European, Anglo, and white men both in the U.S. and around the globe, suggesting that women of color too often become the targets of intersecting oppressions. The structural domain of power as well as the disciplinary domain of power are clearly implicated in Anzaldúa’s critique as it encompasses the social institutions and bureaucracies which underlay the interrelationships she describes. According to Collins, “an impressive array of U.S. social institutions lies at the heart of the structural domain of power” and these “interdependent entities” work together to disadvantage women of color (2000, p. 277). Moreover, Collins asserts, “the prevalent feature of modern, transnational organization” is dependence on bureaucracies that are “dedicated to disciplining and controlling their workforces” (2000, p. 281). In Anzaldúa’s narratives, social institutions emerge with European colonization and are carried on by U.S. entities and bureaucracies. Whether in narratives of conquistadors or wealthy landowners, exploitative employers or corporate conglomerates, Anzaldúa’s stories describe a systematic and bureaucratic colonization, enslavement, and exploitation of the indigenous woman, the *mestiza*, the *Mexicana*, and the *Chicana*. In their discussion of the emergence of oppositional cultures, Mitchell and Feagin assert that “members of oppressed subordinate groups are not powerless pawns . . . but rather are reflective, creative agents that construct a separate reality” in the midst of oppressive conditions (1995, p. 69). In her narratives, Anzaldúa acts as a creative agent, documenting systematic oppression carried out within major social institutions and bureaucratic organizations.

At the same time, it is clear that when Anzaldúa describes sexist practices in Chicana/o culture in her narratives, she is describing fascinating interrelationships among the structural, interpersonal, and hegemonic domains of power. If the structural domain deals with social institutions, Collins asserts that the interpersonal domain of

power signifies the realm of “everyday relationships” among people, that is, “how people treat one another” (2000, pp. 288, 287). In addition, the hegemonic domain of power acts to “justify practices of the other domains of power” (Collins 2000, p. 287). Anzaldúa’s narratives tell us that it was systemic oppression, the “hemispheric rape” and colonization of the Mexican people that created a “false macho,” who, in turn, became an abuser and controller of women—the structural influencing the interpersonal. The institution of marriage itself, according to Anzaldúa’s narratives is a signal form of servitude for women (1987, p. 22). This control of women, Anzaldúa suggests, is deeply imbedded in cultural “ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies” (Collins 2000, p. 285) and passed on by women as well as men, who allow a sort of homegrown “specialized thought” (Collins 2000, p. 284) to hold sway that serves to demean and control women’s lives—the interpersonal influencing the hegemonic, in turn, influencing the interpersonal.

### *Homophobia*

Anzaldúa adds sexuality to a list of intersecting oppressions. Anzaldúa makes clear the response of most cultures to gays and lesbians.

Most cultures have burned and beaten their homosexuals and others who deviate from the sexual common. The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe’s fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, inhuman, non-human. (1987, p. 18)

With regard to her own lesbian identity and sexism and homophobia within Chicana/o culture, Anzaldúa writes, “Not me sold out my people but they me . . . I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me” (1987, p. 22). Anzaldúa argues that in Chicano/a culture, “[w]omen are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants” and the “deviants” are lesbian and gay. Anzaldúa argues that a “lesbian of color” must face ultimate rejection within her own culture, while being constrained by intersecting oppressions within the dominant culture. Her culture abandons her because it expects a straight, Catholic, and non-sexual (except in monogamous marital union and that reservedly) woman. Anzaldúa is a lesbian which makes her doubly “unacceptable,” first according to Catholic and cultural teachings that label her sexuality “faulty,” and second because she is sexual, period. “She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality” (1987, p. 19). Anzaldúa writes that for the lesbian of color there is a “fear of going

home," a fear of ultimate abandonment by the culture, the mother, *la Raza* [the race], for this multi-faceted "rebellion."

Homophobia also follows Anzaldúa into dominant society and the academy. According to Deena Gonzalez, Anzaldúa's work has not been as acceptable in academic circles because of Anzaldúa's lesbian identity. Gonzalez suggests that in *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa "performs a multilayered play against history, philosophy, and literature, but these are all situated on a foundation of lesbian identity that eludes the majority of academics" (1998, p. 61). Moreover, Gonzalez argues that "[f]ew critics, Chicano and non-, appreciate her scholarly activism." In fact, "her history is suspect" and Anzaldúa "was presumably denied admission [to a graduate program which uses *Borderlands*] because she "was not theoretically sophisticated" (1998, p. 61).

Just as Anzaldúa describes the fear of going home—a sadness over her culture's rejection and abandonment of her as a result of her lesbian sexuality—Black lesbians have also described the issues they face living in homophobic Black communities (Lorde 1982, 1984; Smith 1983). Barbara Smith discusses the very real impact of homophobia on the lives of African American women when she writes: "Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining 'straightness' is our last resort" (1982, p. 171). Further, Collins notes that, "[d]espite the increasing visibility of Black lesbians as activists and academics, "African-Americans have tried to ignore homosexuality generally and have avoided serious analysis of homophobia within African-American communities" (2000, p. 125).

Audre Lorde writes that as "a Black lesbian feminist . . . committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole," but "only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth . . . Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles I embrace" to dismantle "the old structures of oppression" (1995, pp. 537, 539). So also does Anzaldúa seek to integrate her many selves, the Chicana, the lesbian, the *india*, the feminist, in order to join the struggle to heal the "split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our language, our thoughts" and "bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war" (1987, p. 80).

Anzaldúa's narrative discussion of homophobia and heterosexism, especially within her community, also imply critiques of oppressors within multiple and interrelated domains of power (Collins 2000).

Anzaldúa implies in her narrative that the burning and beating of “queers” historically was systematic as well as sanctioned by social institutions—presumably the government, the church, and the criminal justice system—with implications for “deviants.” Anzaldúa also suggests that the institutions of marriage, church, and family within Chicana/o culture act as ultimate judges and juries over Chicanas who stray from the cultural norm—straight, Catholic, and nonsexual. In addition, the structural domain of power represented by institutions of higher education impinges on Anzaldúa herself as an author and academic. It is the structural domain of power that influences, then, the interpersonal and day-to-day existence of gays and lesbians who confront homophobia at home; as Anzaldúa describes it, her people rejected, injured, and sold her out. The injury is carried out through well-played hegemonic ideologies and images of the “queer” as “deviant,” “lesser,” “subhuman.” To this Anzaldúa responds in her narrative with defiance and an oppositional stance—“I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me” (1987, p. 22)—which operates to “preserve the dignity and autonomy” (Mitchell and Feagin 1995, p. 69) of her own experience as Chicana lesbian within the culture. Anzaldúa does not act as a “powerless pawn,” but “constructs a separate reality in which to survive” (Mitchell and Feagin 1995, p. 69). And nowhere is Anzaldúa’s construction of a separate reality more apparent than when she describes the *mestiza* consciousness.

### *The Birth of the Mestiza Consciousness and the Power of Writing in the Borderlands*

The culmination of Anzaldúa’s work may very well be what she calls “a new *mestiza* consciousness” (1987, p. 77). Anzaldúa weaves this consciousness from her research, her knowledge, and her fundamental experience. Chela Sandoval suggests that in this new consciousness, Anzaldúa inhabits and explores, “a new psychic terrain” (1991, p. 5). Similarly, Aida Hurtado asserts that in exploring the *mestiza* consciousness, Anzaldúa inhabits the “limen,” a term borrowed from Maria Lugones which signifies “liberation because it furnishes the social, psychological, and philosophical space to conceive of alternatives to oppression” (1998, p. 412). Hurtado adds, “Gloria Anzaldúa . . . advocates a consciousness that simultaneously rejects and embraces, so as not to exclude, what it critically assesses. It is a *mestiza* consciousness that can perceive multiple realities at once” (Hurtado 1999, p. 25). The *mestiza* consciousness is both Anzaldúa’s “oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval 1991) and her

greatest contribution to the achievement of a Chicana feminist standpoint, a standpoint that is at once a “critical consciousness to unpack hegemonic ideologies” and an “interpretative framework” or “constructed knowledge” that offers the “conceptual tools to resist oppression” (Collins 2000, p. 286).

At the same time, it is within the context of her writing that Anzaldúa fosters her cherished *mestiza* consciousness in a process that is marked by suffering but also by great joy. The writer, from Anzaldúa's standpoint, suffers to produce what can bring about transformative change. The power of histories and stories of oppression to transform and to heal is also a theme in the work of Aurora Levins Morales who suggests a paradigm of “medicinal history” (1998). According to Morales, “medicinal history” is a process of telling the untold histories of oppression, revealing the mechanisms of power at play in this oppression, and uncovering the methods of resistance among the oppressed (Morales 1998; see also Garcia 2003).

### ***Mestiza Consciousness-Raising***

A *mestiza* consciousness emerges from experience of life as a *mestiza* and from surviving in the “borderlands.” Being *mestiza* means to be of mixed heritage—Spanish and Indian; but it takes on more significant ramifications in Anzaldúa's work, signifying mixed, period—a blending, an amalgam of cultures, sexual orientations, colors, and ideas. Further, it means learning to cope with and survive within this amalgam. The “borderlands” can mean the concrete border between the U.S. and Mexico; the historical/mythical Aztlán—the homeland of the Chicano/a people; the bridge between worlds. Aida Hurtado, in an analysis of the politics of sexuality in Teatro Campesino, invokes Anzaldúa as she describes Chicana feminists “crossing-over into many social realities” (1998, p. 412).

The “borderlands” signify Anzaldúa's family history of oppression, her memory of brutal backbreaking work, and her knowledge of border history. The “borderlands” are the site of her worst struggles with racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism: “[L]a *mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war . . . The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision” (1987, p. 78). Yet, this crossroads is also the site of her greatest strength. This “floundering in uncharted seas,” this “swamping of her psychological borders” (1987, p. 79) creates other ways of coping and seeing the world. It forces the *mestiza* consciousness into existence in a psychic birthing and synthesis



to become a reflection of the “borderlands” themselves—a juncture, a crossroads, and a consciousness of multiple voices and paradigms.

It is within this other mode of coping created in the “borderlands”—this *mestiza* consciousness—that oppositional culture is both born and reaches fruition. Anzaldúa suggests that the *mestiza* consciousness makes a “conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions... communicates that rupture, documents the struggle” and “adopts new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women and queers” (1987, p. 82). Moreover, the *mestiza* consciousness is heralded by a “tolerance for ambiguity,” a marked flexibility and inclusiveness, as it synthesizes colliding parts. It is a “crossroads” between cultures, genders, and paradigms whether Chicana/o or *gabacha/o* (white), straight or queer, male or female; it is the psychic border between all worlds. The *mestiza* consciousness, in fact, mandates an inclusive vision of multiple views, peoples, cultures, skin colors, and sexualities. The *mestiza*

has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries... Rigidity means death... Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically... The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity... She learns to juggle cultures... She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. (1987, p. 79)

Mary Jo Deegan suggests that Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a “great sociologist” who envisioned a utopian world which “bridged a gap between men and women; experts and citizens; literature and social science” (1997, p. 48). Deegan writes that Gilman “proposed that strong women could resocialize violent and self-destructive men so that they would become nurturant, cooperative, and just... This united, female and male, vision is Gilman's utopia” (1997, p. 48). In like manner, Anzaldúa's narratives, stories, and poetry propose a world that bridges differences and gaps that exist between men and women, gays and straights, Chicanas/os and whites. For Anzaldúa, the future is inclusive.

But, perhaps, closer still to Anzaldúa's conception of the *mestiza* consciousness is the vision explored by W.E.B. Du Bois with his concept of the “double-consciousness” (1995, p. 45). According to Du Bois, the double-consciousness is born of oppression and signifies a consciousness at once American and Black—“two warring ideals in



one dark body” (1995, p. 45). Du Bois stresses that the double-consciousness is characterized by division even while embracing the divide, for it is in the tension that exists between the two warring selves that the chance for true growth emerges. He emphasizes that the American Black, “would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world” (1995, p. 45). It is in embracing the tension of the double-consciousness, Du Bois suggests, that “a better and truer self” can emerge (1903/1995, p. 45). In like manner Anzaldúa introduces a consciousness born of oppression that blends separate and disparate parts whether black or white, male or female, Spanish or Indian, gay or straight. Much like Du Bois’ double-consciousness, the *mestiza* consciousness is described by Anzaldúa as a seat of tension among warring selves, and like the double-consciousness, the *mestiza* consciousness refuses to reject any of its multiple parts or selves. For both Du Bois and Anzaldúa, it is in this tension that growth begins and can lead to transformative change (Martinez 2005).

Anzaldúa’s work could easily be described by what Denise Segura and Beatriz Pesquera term “Chicana Insurgent Feminism,” a type of Chicana feminism that “advances . . . ‘oppositional discourse’ which challenges analytical frameworks that dichotomize the multiple sources of Chicana oppression while positing alternative frameworks grounded in their concrete experiences” (1992, p. 84). Yet, Chela Sandoval suggests that Anzaldúa’s “foundational” book *Borderlands*, articulates a fifth feminism outside Segura and Pesquera’s typology: *Chicana Mestizaje*—“a working chiasm (a mobile crossing) between races, genders, sexes, cultures, languages, and nations” (Sandoval 1998, p. 352). As Saldívar explains, “The border feminist Anzaldúa presents is a woman comfortable with new affiliations that subvert old ways of being, rejecting the homophobic, sexist, racist, imperialist, and nationalist” (1991, p. 214). Anzaldúa’s work echoes Anna Nieto-Gomez’s call to struggle quoted in Angie Chabran-Dernersesian: “Wherever class, racial and sexual exploitation occur, they must be combated” (1999, p. 280).

It is clear at the outset of Anzaldúa’s narrative description of the *mestiza* consciousness that the site of struggle she is referring to lies in the hegemonic domain of power. While, the *mestiza* consciousness emerges from issues within the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains of power as the *mestiza* copes with institutional, bureaucratic, and day-to-day forms of oppression, it is primarily a cultural signifier or consciousness born in the borderlands as a symbolic crossroads for

multiple voices and identities which collide with multiple forms of oppression. It resides, then, in the realm of “ideas,” as well as “symbols, and ideologies” (Collins 2000, p. 285). Mitchell and Feagin argue that racial and ethnic groups often “maintain their opposition to European American culture by assigning unique cultural meanings to imposed products” (1995, p. 70). The *mestiza* consciousness, as described in Anzaldúa’s narratives, takes imposed cultural products such as “alien,” “subhuman,” “wetback,” “mixed blood,” “*vieja*,” and “queer” as well as “white,” “straight,” “*gabacha*,” “Eurocentric masculinist,”—“the good the bad and the ugly”—and transforms the ground on which they interact into a crossroads where all can reach a place of healing, assigning a unique new cultural meaning framed in the borderlands. Moreover, Anzaldúa’s method of assigning meaning is her writing.

### *Narratives and Stories that Disrupt and Transform*

Anzaldúa opens a discussion of her own writing with an old Mexican saying: “Out of poverty, poetry; out of suffering, song” (1987, p. 65). She describes her narratives, stories, and poetry as having a life of their own, as performances wrung from battles with the self, and as capable of transforming herself and her world.

Writing for Anzaldúa is not removed from her life: “I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one” (1987, p. 73). Writing is a “performance,” a living act “encapsulated in time” (1987, p. 67). Anzaldúa insists that each narrative, story, or poem has a life of its own and takes part in creating itself in what amounts to a fundamentally painful and costly process: “Writing produces anxiety . . . Being a writer feels very much like being Chicana or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls” (1987, p. 72). It is like a “cactus needle embedded in the flesh” that “worries deeper and deeper” (1987, p. 73). Anzaldúa likens her own body to a “battlefield for the pitched fight between the inner image and the words trying to recreate it.” It is, for Anzaldúa a sleepless battle “teetering on the edge” of a dark drop (1987, p. 74). Moreover, writing can also sicken Anzaldúa, “because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct . . . but in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make ‘sense’ of them, and once they have ‘meaning’ they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy” (1987, p. 70).

Ultimately, it is the narrator, the storyteller, and the poet’s task to surrender, to give up, and to “‘let the walls fall’” (1987, p. 74). It is also then that her narratives, stories, and poems can be transformative

for the community and society. Anzaldúa writes: "The ability of story (narratives and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman . . ." (1987, p. 66). For Anzaldúa, her stories and poetry are born in a "shamanic state" on the ground of everyday experience in a quest for survival; but it is also the beginning of wisdom as an affirmation of human dignity. Anzaldúa writes:

And once again I recognize that the internal tension of oppositions can propel . . . the *mestiza* writer out of the *metate* where she is being ground like corn and water, eject her out as *nahual*, an agent of transformation, able to modify and shape primordial energy and therefore able to change herself and others . . . (1987, pp. 74–75)

Anzaldúa is writer and shape-changer and her work is a "sensuous act" (1987, p. 71) that is "dedicated to the validation of humans" (1987, p. 67).

For Audre Lorde, poetry is "not a luxury" but "a revelatory distillation of experience . . . carved from the rock experience of our daily lives" (1984, p. 37), no more removed from daily existence than the stories and poems of Anzaldúa. Lorde stresses that poetry is "a vital necessity of women's existence" which "forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (1984, p. 37). Likewise, Anzaldúa suggests that the writer of narratives, poems, and stories, can become an agent of change, with the power to shape ideas into active transformation of the social world.<sup>6</sup>

Mitchell and Feagin argue that oppositional cultures are sometimes demonstrated when people of color "speak of the need to walk in balance, to acknowledge both intuitive and empirical realities" (1995, p. 82). Anzaldúa's narratives and stories evoke this concept, in that, she believes her writing has the power to transform history, a stance outside of "logico-deductive modes of thinking" (Mitchell and Feagin 1995, p. 82). The significance of narratives and stories is noted in Collins' work as she suggests that narratives and stories

<sup>6</sup>Similarly, Aurora Levis Morales suggests a paradigm of "medicinal stories" to assert that the telling of our stories, our histories, has the transformative power to heal the individual and the collective. She writes, "It is in retelling the stories of victimization, recasting our roles from subhuman scapegoats to beings full of dignity and courage, that [re-creating the shattered knowledge of our humanity] becomes possible" (1998, p. 13).

can evoke concrete “practical images” that inform everyday experience and help deconstruct prevailing racist/sexist/classist/homophobic notions (2000, p. 258). In addition, narratives, stories, and poems can be significant purveyors of meaning within the hegemonic domain of power as they have the potential to harness the “subjugated knowledge” of the oppressed (Collins 2000, p. 286). Gloria Anzaldúa creates multiple levels of meaning with her stories, narratives, and poetry as she encapsulates the history of Chicanas/os in the borderlands and their struggles with intersecting oppressions. Anzaldúa’s writing becomes a seat of *mestiza* consciousness-raising within the hegemonic domain of power and contributes to the achievement of a Chicana feminist standpoint.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Bonnie Mitchell and Joe Feagin discuss a theory of oppositional culture suggesting that people of color will draw on their own cultural strengths to resist oppression, preserving autonomy and dignity, providing “an alternative construction of identity,” and offering the dominant group a “critique of their own culture” (1995, p. 69). Patricia Hill Collins discusses standpoint theory in relation to the experience of Black women in America who experience oppression within multiple domains of power, an experience which fosters “a collective group consciousness” or “collective standpoint” that becomes significant to their survival (2000, p. 36). It has been the task of this paper to suggest that Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*—Anzaldúa’s narratives, stories, and poems—represent a viable oppositional cultural expression that critiques intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, found within multiple domains of power—the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains. Moreover, the purpose of this paper was to assert that Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* contributes to the achievement of a collective consciousness among Chicanas—a Chicana feminist standpoint.

It is important to point out that just as Patricia Hill Collins argues against assuming the existence of a homogeneous “Black woman’s standpoint”—an “essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic” (2000, p. 28), so also there exists no homogeneous, Chicana woman’s standpoint. Collins argues against suppressing the differences among Black women in search of “an elusive group unity” and instead asserts, that “standpoints refer to group knowledge, recurring patterns of differential treatment” and that “it is more accurate to say that a Black

women's standpoint does exist" (2000, p. 28, 26). This is also true of a Chicana *women's* standpoint, that emerges in the work of Anzaldúa and several other Chicana thinkers discussed in this paper.

It is also important to state that Anzaldúa's narratives, stories, and poems as well as the work of other Chicanas whose work grapples with oppressive structures, bureaucracies, ideologies, and relationships can have significant impact. Mitchell and Feagin suggest that oppositional cultures can help to alter the existing structure of domination, in that, they "provide models for coping with and reversing the oppressive excesses of the dominant culture" (1995, p. 83). Collins also argues that work by such thinkers can be critical. She suggests that such women in the Black community hold potential power: "Black feminist thinkers potentially offer individual African-American women the conceptual tools to resist oppression" (2000, p. 286).

In addition, this article has attempted to introduce the work of Gloria Anzaldúa to a wider audience within the discipline of sociology. It is hoped that future research and analyses will continue to include Anzaldúa's work, especially in the wake of her recent passing. Future research could analyze other oppositional stories in conjunction with Anzaldúa's, providing additional insights into Anzaldúa's work and contributions to feminist sociology and the sociology of race relations. These oppositional stories should come from a range of differing group standpoints, each sharing "its own partial, situated knowledge," (Collins 2000, p. 270). Future analyses which incorporate Anzaldúa might also discuss Anzaldúa's continued contributions to a Chicana feminist standpoint as up and coming Chicanas are introduced to Anzaldúa's work.

For Patricia Hill Collins, empowerment for oppressed groups "involves rejecting the dimensions of knowledge that perpetuate objectification, commodification, and exploitation," and using "our individual, group, and formal educational ways of knowing that foster our humanity" (2000, p. 289). Ultimately, the *mestiza* consciousness is the space where Anzaldúa is affirmed in her own humanity, and where she affirms the humanity of all others. Anzaldúa's narratives, stories, and poetry document the experience of oppression of Chicanos/as in the borderlands within multiple domains of power, voice a conscious opposition to that oppression, and reinforce and diffuse a unique angle of vision—a *mestiza* consciousness—that espouses empowerment and transformative change. In this way, Anzaldúa reclaims "the freedom to carve and chisel my own face" (1987, p. 22)—the "power of self definition" (Collins 2000, p. 285).

Walter Benjamin's title for both the hearthbound and the traveling spinners of didactic truths is "storyteller" (1969). Anzaldúa is worthy

of the title, and she is both of these as she spins her truths from within the historic/mythical boundaries of Aztlán, yet, traverses the entirety of worlds within the “borderlands.” While her journeys are bounded literally in space, she travels immense distances between cultures, paradigms, and peoples. As Anzaldúa suggests, a journey into the *mestiza* consciousness may be painful, but the lessons learned by truly reaching the “borderlands” are great.

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