

## **A Response to Melissa McCartney's Essay *Gender Performativity and the Borderlands: Butler and Anzaldúa on Liminal Identity***

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I really enjoyed Melissa McCartney's essay *Gender Performativity and the Borderlands: Butler and Anzaldúa on Liminal Identity*. Before reading this paper, I had only a slight understanding of Judith Butler's work and no knowledge of Anzaldúa's. It was a pleasure to read both this paper and the texts in the bibliography. In her paper, McCartney uncovers similarities between Judith Butler's *Gender Performativity* and Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness. These similarities are clear and well-described. McCartney shows that both writers concern themselves with challenging binary thinking and, in particular, they share the goal of disrupting the inner/outer dichotomy. She begins her paper by describing gender performativity. She does a great job of outlining this term. However, the definition of Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness is gradually revealed throughout the paper. This strategy works well but I would like to begin my response by quickly outlining this term.

Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness is a dynamic "new mythos" that is beyond binary thinking. For Anzaldúa, this *mestiza* consciousness forms "a new value system with images and symbols' that may serve to heal the split between 'white... and colored', male and female' and the hegemonically differentiated 'us' and 'them'."<sup>1</sup> She challenges the accepted paradigms, transmitted to us by culture made by those in power; paradigms that represent culturally determined roles forced upon the individual from the outside. And she uses the consciousness of *mestiza* "to explore and explode the ways in which [these] socially enforced paradigms are established through surface and conceptual metaphors as well as the ways... [that they] seem to label people as acceptable or unacceptable."<sup>2</sup> *Mestiza* consciousness is, therefore, "a metaphorical borderland" where the self navigates between the conflicting forces in the margins. "As a *mestiza* ('a woman of white, Mexican [and] Indian decent') and a lesbian and feminist," Anzaldúa challenges and breaks down the unitary aspect of each concept of identity in order to show that identity itself is liminal.<sup>3</sup>

In her paper, McCartney draws comparisons between Butler and Anzaldúa in order to show that their theories are not at odds with one another but rather are compatible and share the same goal of "disrupting the inner/outer coherence placed upon naming, defining, and policing bodies."<sup>4</sup> The first comparison that she points out is the realization that both Butler and Anzaldúa recognize the role of society in characterizing reality. This point is well argued and is clearly found in both Anzaldúa's and Butler's work. The second connection that McCartney outlines is the fact that both writers use "the language of the 'border' and [the] conception of the inner and the outer to elaborate upon the regulation of the body..."<sup>5</sup> I found this connection to be most interesting and worth a deeper look.

Here McCartney elaborates upon Butler's understanding that the idea of "'inner' and 'outer' only make[s] sense with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability; this inner/outer dichotomy made stable by "cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation... constitutes a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject."<sup>6</sup> Thus, for Butler, gender performativity creates the impression of a sharp inner/outer dichotomy and the

body is viewed as the boundary between the two. This boundary (i.e. the body) is the border that is patrolled by social discourse.

As McCartney points out, Anzaldúa also recognizes this inner/outer dichotomy. For her, however, "the struggle has always been inner and is played out in the outer terrains."<sup>7</sup> For Anzaldúa, in contrast to Butler, the border is not the body but the psyche. However, I particularly like the connection that McCartney finds between Butler and Anzaldúa when she notes that for both thinkers battles take place in the outer terrain- for Butler these battles taking place in the outer terrain are "the physical gender performances or... the 'surface politics of the body'" and for Anzaldúa they are "the socio-ethnic performances (i.e. 'immigrant Latino' or 'Anglo in power')."<sup>8</sup> However, it is important to remember that for Anzaldúa ultimately the place of conflict, of collision, is in the psyche.

This leads to the next comparison that McCartney draws between Butler and Anzaldúa: the fact that both thinkers identify the border as the place where the rigid inner/outer dichotomy is upset and, therefore, where the path is forged "to the destruction of the one-to-one bond between the 'inner' and the 'outer'."<sup>9</sup> As described by McCartney, Butler expounds upon the idea that the location of this breakdown is the soul. McCartney clarifies Butler's theory when she writes that "by denying its own inscription upon the body, the soul flouts this dichotomy and necessarily creates itself as a transgression, as that which subscribes to neither the inner nor the outer in a world in which everything must align with one or the other."<sup>10</sup> Then she draws the connection between Butler's understanding of the soul as a place where the inner/outer dichotomy breaks down and Anzaldúa's understanding of the soul as a torn entity trapped between the world of the spirit and the physical world. For each thinker, the border is the place where the inner/outer dichotomy breaks down. For Anzaldúa this breaking down occurs in the psyche and for Butler it occurs on the body.

McCartney then draws another comparison by showing that both thinkers recognize the fact that "all social systems are vulnerable at their margins."<sup>11</sup> And, indeed, all signifiers of identity are vulnerable at their margins. Butler deconstructs the signifiers of gender and shows how they are not solid concepts but rather fluid terms created by performances played out upon the body. Here, it is the gestures that are acted which signify gender and not the core within. The stability of the signifier is challenged at the boundary of the inner/outer dichotomy. It is challenged at the level of the body itself. McCartney cites Butler's example of drag in order to show how the body is open to resignification and recontextualization through acts and gestures. And, in the same way that Butler shows the specific signifier "gender" to be fluid, Anzaldúa shows that all signifiers of identity are fluid.

For her, however, this deconstruction occurs not at the level of the body but in the psyche itself. It is in the psyche, "in the hard place of collision", where identities collide, flow into one another, break down, and, thus, open up a space for something new. It is in this place where the physical and geographical meets with the "psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands."<sup>12</sup> For Butler, the signifier of gender breaks down at the boundary of the body but for Anzaldúa all signifiers of identity break down at the boundary of the psyche, of the soul, where the self navigates between the conflicting forces in the margins. This revolutionary process that leads to the understanding of identity as liminal is known as *mestiza* consciousness.

In the last section of the paper, McCartney draws a final connection between Butler's understanding that gender is created through the "*stylized repetition of acts*" and Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness. She endeavors to show that *mestiza* consciousness, like gender performativity, is more than a term- but a ritual. In order to prove her point, McCartney cites a passage where Anzaldúa juxtaposes directions for making tortillas in English and Spanish. She states that this juxtaposition impresses more than the fluidity of identity upon the reader but it is also a kind of incantation, "a ceremony of women's work in which the 'tortillas' are forever being made."<sup>13</sup> In the same way for Butler gender is forever being signified through the repetition of acts. And in the same way for Anzaldúa, in *mestiza* consciousness, seemingly stable identities are forever both acted out and colliding with one another.

McCartney draws many connections between Butler's understanding of gender performativity and Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness. She shows how they both work towards the breaking down of the inner and outer dichotomy. She also shows how signifiers are broken down and made fluid by these understandings: Butler focuses specifically on the signifiers of gender and Anzaldúa focuses on all dichotomies that form identity. In both cases, identity is understood as fluid. Indeed, both the body and the mind can be viewed as metaphorical borderlands where the self navigates between the conflicting forces of the margin and where the inner/outer dichotomy breaks down. However, it is important to recognize one fundamental difference between these two theorists: Butler's gender productivity focuses explicitly upon gender but, in contrast, Anzaldúa shows how gender itself collides and intertwines with other aspects of identity such as race, sexual orientation, and class. This is the essence of *mestiza* consciousness and this is one of the goals of US third world feminism. I really enjoyed this paper, and I can only hope that this response did justice to McCartney's interesting and thought provoking work.□

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<sup>1</sup> Erika Aigner-Varoz, "Metaphors of a Mestiza Consciousness: Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera," *Melus* 25 (Summer 2000), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47-48.

<sup>4</sup> Melissa McCartney, "Gender Performativity and the Borderlands: Butler and Anzaldúa on Liminal Identity," GPPC Conference 2008, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 182.

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<sup>7</sup> McCartney, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Aigner-Varoz, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> McCartney, p. 8.