

Gender Performativity and the Borderlands: Butler and Anzaldúa on Liminal Identity

By Melissa McCartney, Haverford College

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains gender performativity, stating of the concept that, "words, acts, gestures, and desire [corporeal signification] produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause."¹ Importantly here, Butler contends that these "words, acts, gestures" are a kind of external ruse, a literal slight of hand that "gestures" to a coherent identity, essence or "internal core." As stressed by her emphasis upon the political conception of 'women' as a group in the book's opening, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," paramount in Butler's interest in this mythical "internal core" is its political ramifications. Butler states to this effect that, "[t]he displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender identity onto a psychological 'core' precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the ineffable interiority of its sex or of its true identity."² In other words, because of this performance, this "core" is taken to be fixed and unmovable, an "origin" always already constituted, placed and named. Consequently, the "gendered subject" is fixed and defined as well; it always already has its own "political constitution" and "identity." Therefore, in creating and defining this "interior essence," gender performativity helps name, categorize and define any "gendered subject," importantly, in Butler's case, including that of 'woman.'³

Butler's concern with the function of gender performativity seems to set itself at odds with Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of living on the Borderlands because of the latter's propensity to name and categorize, specifically to do so in regards to the origin and identity of "mestiza." However, as presented in "La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness," Anzaldúa's "consciousness of the Borderlands" or "mestiza consciousness" is not the kind of blind subscription to naming problematized by Butler, but it is instead a negotiation within the problematic limits of language. "[M]estiza" constructs a liminal subject in place of the kind of stagnant subject that Butler sees created by the direct interpretation of gender performativity.⁴

Butler's desire to expose the sleight of hand of gender performativity and Anzaldúa's conception of the Borderlands first begin to mesh together as both theorists recognize society's role in defining, categorizing or naming the body. Butler asserts that her notion of gender performativity, "suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse."⁵ Anzaldúa's account of the Borderlands coincides with the role society plays for Butler here, as she echoes this quotation stating flatly, "we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates."⁶ Importantly, for both theorists, reality is a product of social practices. It also, therefore, is embedded within and acts through the language of that society as reality is built in social "discourse" and "communicat[ion]," the result of a continuous whirlwind of words and signs. For Butler, the struggle for reality, for

identity, is necessarily the effect of this "discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body."⁷ Here, Butler not only recognizes society's role in characterizing reality, but its mode of relaying reality to the outside world through, "the surface politics of the body." Thus, society defines the body, names it and inscribes a certain role upon it in order to offer up a "public[ally] regulat[ed]," body, one that it makes intelligible through its language and, in doing so, gives place within its reality.

These two theorists connect beyond their interpretation of the function of society upon reality as they both employ the language of the "border" and a conception of the inner and the outer to elaborate upon the regulation of the body and meditate upon the restrictions of society that are the result of this policing. To do so, Butler identifies "social discourse" as "the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the 'integrity' of the subject."⁸ In referring to social discourse as "gender border control," Butler impresses upon the reader the rigidity of the boundaries of the "inner" and "outer." She stresses that society guarantees that the inner and the outer will be forced to correspond, that the outer which society requires will be made to translate into a certain internal essence.

In her work in general Anzaldúa takes up the idea of the "border" in a more literal way. However, at one particular moment she states of the "border" which Butler sees as being so policed, "[o]ur struggle has always been inner: Chicano, *indio*, American Indian, *mojado*, *mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains."⁹ In the physical gender performances or in the "surface politics of the body" for Butler and in these socio-ethnic performances ("immigrant Latino" or "Anglo in power") for Anzaldúa, the battles taking place upon these "outer terrains" have obscured the identity of "inner." Thus, for both theorists the "outer" muffles the "inner;" it is a disingenuous representation. It is at best a performance, at worst a stifling lie. However, in the midst of this crippling relationship between the "outer" and the "inner," Anzaldúa's use of "border," as she refers to "psyches" as "bordertowns," claims the "psyche[]" as a liminal space, as a place of multiplicity, of crossing over and, therefore, of possibility.

By elaborating upon the psyche and the soul, Anzaldúa's work identifies a place that upsets the rigid dichotomy between inner and outer and, in doing so, plots the destruction of the one-to-one bond between the "inner" and the "outer." Integrally to this intention, Butler contends that, "the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed *on* the body as a social signification that perpetually renounces itself as such."¹⁰ Thus, the soul is the location where the "inner/outer" dichotomy breaks down. 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. Anzaldúa speaks of the soul in terms of a kind of transgression as well stating, "*El choque de un alma atrapado entre el mundo del espíritu y el mundo de la técnica a veces la deja entullada.*"¹¹ Here the "*alma*," the soul, is a torn entity and it is trapped between the world of the spirit, the inner world, and the world of what Anzaldúa calls the "*técnica*," the technical, the world

of the physical or the outer world. The "*alma*" is not situated easily at this crossroads, however; instead, it is trapped there by a "*choque*," a collision, which sometimes leaves it crippled in upon itself. Anzaldúa's account of what it is to stand at a crossroads, on a border, at a place where the strict translation of the outer to the inner is questioned and undermined shows not only the difficulty and pain of this position, but creates this "*choque*" as a revolutionary place.

Anzaldúa's "*choque*" is a place of unreconciled multiplicity. As evident by the image of a collision, a real crash at a crossroads, the "*choque*" is a hard place, one where things inevitably must come together, but do not do so in any kind of harmony. In "Subversive Bodily Acts," Butler relays Mary Douglas' suggestion, "that all social systems are vulnerable at their margins and that all margins are accordingly considered dangerous."¹² As this "*choque*" brings all these margins together in a place where, "commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture," those on the margins, far enough on the outskirts of any culture to brush up against another, to risk collision or even the meshing of culture, become a threat to the social system.¹³

Ultimately, by recognizing the desirability of this "*choque*," this collision of the margins, this space in which the soul realizes its revolutionary potential, Anzaldúa's account of the Borderlands aligns itself with Butler's critique of gender performativity. However, Anzaldúa's faithfulness to naming and to categorization in her own writings at once presents itself in contrast to Butler's goals and works. Butler seeks a lack of the "desired" "coherence," a breakdown in the names and categorizations that are unwieldy and incapable of expressing that which they presume to.¹⁴ Furthermore, Butler asserts that "representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject."¹⁵ While what constitutes a subject and what subject is represented are both privy to a problematic policing, Butler, still recognizing its necessity, firmly casts aside naming and categorization as she rejects any complete signifier stating, "*women*, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety."¹⁶

Indeed, one of the premises of the critique of gender performativity is frankly, as shown in this case with "*women*," that the signifier cannot hold the signified. In contrast to this, Anzaldúa relies upon naming and the use of terms just as problematic as "*women*" to relay portions of her argument and ultimately to justify a move toward the "consciousness of the Borderlands" as she observes early on in her argument, "[*m*]en, even more than *women*, are fettered to gender roles. *Women* at least have had the guts to break out of bondage. Only *gay men* have had the courage to expose themselves to the *woman* inside them...I've encountered a few scattered and isolated gentle *straight men*."¹⁷ Here, Anzaldúa uses a litany of terms to diagnose the problems she sees in society and even uses "*woman*" in its stereotypical sense in an attempt to relate the inadequate signifiers of "*men*" and "*gay men*" through this term. It could be contended from this passage that Anzaldúa is denying Butler's inadequacy of terms, however, with the introduction and definition of the "*mestiza*" it becomes clear that Anzaldúa is herself also dissatisfied with the language through which she has to communicate as she fumblingly embarks upon the task of gesturing toward and working within the inadequate terms that Butler painstakingly draws attention to theoretically.

By locating her own term, "*mestiza*," and citing it as a signifier that is not fixed or discretely locatable, Anzaldúa's piece does not work toward blindly upholding names and categorizations, but draws attention to the inadequacy of concrete signifiers. In turn, with "*mestiza*," she tries to offer one that is liminal and fluid. Butler states, continuing her reading of Mary Douglas, that, "the naturalized notion of 'the' body is itself a consequence of taboos that render that body discrete by virtue of its stable boundaries."¹⁸ Here, Butler recognizes the way in which "taboos," themselves notoriously social prohibitions, rely upon the "discrete" body to uphold society's "boundaries." This "discrete" body is limited, privy to a finite number of interpretations but as suggested by its homonym, 'discreet,' it is also restricted to the realm of an approved class of social actions. In contrast to the discretion cast upon other terms, "*mestiza*" is a place of continuous flexibility and plurality. Of the "*mestiza*" Anzaldúa claims, "[s]he 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."¹⁹ Through this character, the "*mestiza*" comes to signify the bridging of the inner and the outer as she moves herself into the revolutionary and transgressive realm of the psychic or the soul as, "[t]he *mestiza*'s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness."²⁰ The "*mestiza*" is inundated with the need to obliterate the firm line from inner to outer. Therefore, the "*mestiza*" consciousness is that which lives in the hard place of collision, of "*choque*," as "it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm."²¹

Anzaldúa proves her rejection of unity or coherence as she confuses the site of her own body claiming, among other conundrums, "[a]s a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races."²² Here, Anzaldúa resists rigid terms and unity, ("I have no race") while at the same time identifying with a category ("[a]s a lesbian") and multiplying herself ("I am all races"). In doing so, she lives out a particularly "*mestiza*" consciousness as she breaks herself down, refuses oneness and scatters herself anew. Thus, even though "*mestiza*" is a term, itself a unity, in its definition it is a oneness that is constantly "breaking down;" it is a signifier that is forever slipping its meaning.

At perhaps the apex of her discussion of the "*mestiza*" consciousness, Anzaldúa uses the very style of her writing to illustrate the way in which she is using the idea of the "*mestiza*" to create a liminal identity within the restrictive and limited language she has to work with as she states shortly, "*Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading."²³ Here, Anzaldúa lets identities breach each other's boundaries as the Spanish and the English translation of this declaration are forced to share a sentence, even though, alone, they each themselves constitute a full sentence. Speaking of "gender parody" in her discussion of drag, Judith Butler states, "[the] perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization."²⁴ With this "fluidity of identities," Butler is speaking to a breakdown (which she uses drag to illustrate) of the rigid one-to-one correlation that is forced between the inner and the outer. In the face of this "fluidity of identities" and "resignification," a new kind of language or communication and a new conception of meaning becomes possible. As Anzaldúa's Spanish voice runs into her English voice in the above quotation, it

becomes clear that what Anzaldúa is creating as she weaves identities, makes them sit together but allows them to stand alone, is a “fluidity of identities.” She is making a place in which identities flow into one another and in so commingling, create a new space for language and signification, the space of the liminal.

In “*mestiza*,” Anzaldúa creates a liminal space, a term that does not specifically locate but instead is meant to speak to the fluidity of identities. However, her account of the “*mestiza*” consciousness goes beyond this word and language itself to create “*mestiza*” as more than a term—but as a ritual. In a moment much like her other juxtapositions of Spanish and English Anzaldúa states:

Lavando y remojando el maíz en agua de cal, depojando el pellejo. Moiendo, mixteando, amasando, haciendo tortillas de masa. She steeps the corn in lime, it swells, softens. With stone roller on *metate*, she grinds the corn, then grinds again. She kneads and moulds the dough, pats the round balls into *tortillas*.²⁵

Here, in Spanish and then again in English, the reader is given directions for making “*tortillas*.” The literal mixture of languages creates the same effect as before, impressing upon the reader a certain fluidity of identity, but the repetition here, the walking through step by step of the process twice, goes beyond this fluidity. Instead, it creates a kind of incantation, a ceremony of woman’s work in which the “*tortillas*” are forever being remade. Butler says that, “[g]ender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*.”²⁶ This is as close as Butler comes to ascribing any specific appropriate treatment of gender. Her emphasis here, as she reconstitutes the widely held notion of gender into a “*stylized repetition of acts*,” makes gender, like “*mestiza*,” into a ritual. It becomes a ceremony like the one Anzaldúa offers up in her recitation of the making of tortillas. In making these identities rituals, both Butler and Anzaldúa dislodge “gender” and “*mestiza*” as stable signifiers free-floating through time. Instead they make them into a malleable language, the language of fluidity and “*amasando*.” They become signifiers that constantly expand, incorporate and recreate meaning, rather than exclude it.

It becomes clear through this investigation that Butler’s observation of gender performativity and the coherence it forces upon bodies, outer to inner, and Anzaldúa’s “consciousness of the Borderlands” are largely compatible and tend toward the same goal—disrupting the inner/outer coherence placed upon named, defined and policed bodies. Ultimately, with Anzaldúa’s conception of the “*mestiza*” she creates a liminal and ambiguous term, a revolutionary body sitting at a place in-between, a place where Butler’s “fluidity of identities” can be realized.²⁷ At the beginning of her article, Anzaldúa speaks of José Vasconcelos’ theory of inclusively stating, “As the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly ‘crossing over,’ this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool.”²⁸ This is the strain from which the “‘alien’ consciousness,” or the “consciousness of the Borderlands” derives.²⁹ Here, in the image of these inclusive genes, the very agents of translation between the inner and the outer, lies the literal realization of Butler’s “fluidity of identities.” By using an actual biogenetic

term, chromosomal 'crossing over,' this theory and Anzaldúa's employment of it reminds that even at the core of every body there is a liminal space, a place of "fluidity" that, though it may elude language, is still struggling to find voice.□

© Melissa McCartney 2008

[Return to the Proceedings page](#)

¹ Judith Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 136.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, "La conciencia de la mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness," *Borderlands: La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 99.

⁵ Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," p. 136.

⁶ Anzaldúa, "La conciencia de la mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness," p. 100.

⁷ Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," p. 136.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Anzaldúa, "La conciencia de la mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness," p. 109.

¹⁰ Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," p. 135.

¹¹ Anzaldúa, "La conciencia de la mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness," p. 100.

¹² Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," p. 132.

¹³ Anzaldúa, "La conciencia de la mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness," p. 100.

¹⁴ Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," p. 136.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁷ Anzaldúa, "La conciencia de la mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness," p. 106. *Emphasis mine.*

¹⁸ Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," pp. 132-133.

¹⁹ Anzaldúa, "La conciencia de la mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness," p. 101.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

²¹ Ibid., p. 102.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 103.

²⁴ Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," p. 138.

²⁵ Anzaldúa, "*La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness*," p. 103.

²⁶ Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," p. 140.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 138.

²⁸ Anzaldúa, "*La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness*," p. 99.

²⁹ Ibid.