

ANZALDÚA'S BACKPACK: NAHUALA INVENTORIES OF NEW MESTIZA INDIGENISM

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As one way of clarifying the potential value of what I elsewhere call Anzaldúa's Coatlicuean appropriations¹ of Chicana Indigenism, I will engage in an extended critique of what has become an influential work for attacks on Chicana appropriations of indigeneity, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo's essay "Who's the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón" (2001), an essay subsequently worked into her very important book on *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas*.² Her argument does several important things, such as (1) critique the ongoing legacy of Mexican state Indigenismo; (2) highlight the tendency for 20th-century revolutionary regimes of subjection to adopt the regime of subjection characteristic of modern capitalist developmentalism; and (3) recognize the need for alliances between the various decolonization practices throughout the Americas. Saldaña-Portillo's critical gestures *could* help in the construction of a strategic solidarity movement on the lines of Leslie Marmon Silko's network of tribal coalitions (1991) by providing guidelines for judging the efficacy and implications of the various mestizajes

across the continent. And if Saldaña-Portillo's charges against Anzaldúa were true, then we should pay attention to avoid such mistakes ourselves. I will argue, however, that Saldaña-Portillo's critique in the end contributes to the further fragmentation of North American decolonization movements by erasing up front the radical potential of refigurations of mestizaje such as Anzaldúa's new *mestiza*.

SALDAÑA-PORTILLO'S CRITIQUE OF MESTIZAJE AS BIOLOGISM

The immediate framing context for Saldaña-Portillo's critique of Anzaldúa's indigenism in *Borderlands* is the former's attempts to move the concept and trope of mestizaje beyond the biologism and ultimately anti-Indian nature of Mexican *indigenismo*. Her overall goal is "to recuperate a more sophisticated concept of mestizaje: one that might possibly extend political enfranchisement or literary representation to the broad range of subject positions implied by a common Mexican heritage" (280). She suggests that Anzaldúa opens with a "moving" metaphor for mestizaje that promises just such a sophisticated recuperation: the border as the open wound that is constantly torn back open before it can heal. This metaphor, in its constant back-and-forth wounding/healing/wounding movement, "unsettles the conventional usage of mestizaje by restaging the brutality of the initial colonial encounter between Spaniard and Indian in the neocolonial encounter between the First World and Third World" (280). In addition, it "unsettles the conventional usage of mestizaje for Chicanos, as well" as for Mexicans, by interrupting "the teleological drive of mestizaje" (280) in the "Raza Cósmica" imagination that sees the mestizo as the prefiguration of humanity's futuristic product of miscegenation. (I should note here that also Anzaldúa draws from this same teleology elsewhere in *Borderlands* by turning to José Vasconcelos's notion of the Raza Cósmica [99].)

The heart of the problem, as Saldaña-Portillo points out, lies in the following:

I would like to refocus our attention on the residual effect of this era of Chicano nationalism: the continued use of mestizaje as a trope for Chicana/o identity and the presumed access to indigenous subjectivity

that this biologized trope offers us. Although the deployment of mestizaje in the Southwest is different from its historical deployment in Mexico, when Chicana / o intellectuals and artists appropriate the tropes of mestizaje and indigenismo for the purposes of identity formation, we are nevertheless operating within the racial ideology from which these tropes are borrowed. [. . .] Thus, in our Chicana/o reappropriation of the biologized terms of mestizaje and indigenismo, we are also always recuperating the Indian as an ancestral past rather than recognizing contemporary Indians as coinhabitants not only of this continent abstractly conceived but of the neighborhoods and streets of hundreds of U.S. cities and towns. (279)

The key problems of Chicana/o appropriations of Indigeneity that Saldaña-Portillo identifies here are biologism and erasure. These two procedural traps linger on as "residual effects" from Mexican appropriations of indigeneity in revolutionary mestizaje through Movimiento Chicano appropriations of this mestizaje to "postnational," "postrevolutionary" reappropriations by Chicana indigenists such as Anzaldúa.

Saldaña-Portillo is certainly right in part by pointing to a residual biologism in Anzaldúa's statements concerning "the Indian in her." Anzaldúa at times "proves" her indigenous roots by pointing out her "Indian" physical and personality features: "There is the quiet of the Indian about us" (86); "I am visible—see this Indian face—yet I am invisible. I both blind them with my beak nose and am their blind spot" (108). Yet it is through her distinctive physical features in contrast to her family—her dark skin, earning her the nickname Prieta—that Anzaldúa is first articulated or hailed as an "Indian." One of the crucial things this phenomenon shows is that identification with one's indigenous roots has only recently been encouraged among Chicanas and Chicanos, precisely through their articulation as Chicanas and Chicanos rather than Mexican-Americans or Hispanics.

ANZALDÚA'S BACKPACK

In preparing the reader for her critique of another layer of Anzaldúa's troubling indigenism in *Borderlands*, Saldaña-Portillo writes the following:

[I]ndigenous identity is not reducible to biology. Any person born an Indian, with all the genetic Indian features, can become Ladinized by refusing to practice his or her indigenous identity in the hopes of accessing the limited amount of power made available to poor mestizos. Indigenous identity, for Menchú and the Zapatistas, depends not simply on biology but on the rigorous practice of the thoroughly modern cultural, linguistic, social, religious, and political forms that constitute one as indigenous. And these are not forms that exist in a kind of pastiche grab bag of Indian spiritual paraphernalia, as they seem to exist for Anzaldúa. (286-87)

Saldaña-Portillo thus transfers us from the realm of *biologism*—"indigenous identity is not reducible to biology"—to the realm of *practice*: the "thoroughly modern cultural, linguistic, social, religious, and political" practice that constitutes Indigenous identity can be rejected through Ladinization or rigorously embraced through the performances that confer Indigenous legitimacy upon these practitioners. Anzaldúa's apparently "pastiche grab bag of Indian spiritual paraphernalia" has not been sanctioned through submission to such legitimating performances. I would suggest here that what Saldaña-Portillo does not make room for is the reverse: the turn from Ladinization to socio-political legitimacy. What is the mechanism whereby those who have been born into Ladinization might instead perform their Indigeneity? In other words, after centuries of genocidal detribalization, how does a people rejoin or reconstitute their tribe? It is precisely in an attempt to answer this question that Anzaldúa turns to her backpack trope, the difference between backpacks and grab bags being constitutive:

[The new mestiza] goes through her backpack, keeps her journal and address book, throws away the muni-bart metromaps. The coins are heavy and they go next, then the greenbacks flutter through the air. She keeps her knife, can opener and eyebrow pencil. She puts bones, pieces of bark, *hierbas*, eagle feather, snakeskin, tape recorder, the rattle and drum in her pack and she sets out to become the complete *tolteca*. (104)

Saldaña-Portillo elaborates on this passage:

Ultimately, Anzaldúa's model of representation reproduces liberal developmental models of choice that privilege her position as a U.S. Chicana: she goes through her backpack and decides what to keep and what to throw out, choosing to keep signs of indigenous identity as ornamentation and spiritual revival. But what of the living Indian who refuses *mestizaje* as an avenue to political and literary representation? What of the *indígena* who demands new representational models that include her among the living?

I want to question various elements of this condemnation before moving on to Anzaldúa's actual indigenizing practice. To what extent is Anzaldúa's choice to reclaim her Indigeneity really a sign of her reproduction of "liberal developmental models of choice that privilege her position as a U.S. Chicana"? To what extent is the Coatlicue process—Anzaldúa's path to her Indigenous self—simply a consumerist collection of signs of Indianness? To what extent is the *mestizaje* of Anzaldúa's new *mestiza* really the same as the *mestizaje* posited by racist Mexican nationalism? Might the *mestizaje* that Anzaldúa constructs be desirable by some other "living Indians"? To what extent does Saldaña-Portillo's distinction between Chicanas and the living *indígena* reinforce the racist legacies of both the Spanish and the Anglo-American Conquests? What nationalist practices serve to police this rigid and racialized distinction, despite Saldaña-Portillo's claim to acknowledge indigeneity as a result of social performance rather than of biology?

Saldaña-Portillo positions the passage above as perhaps the greatest sign of Anzaldúa's apparent complicity in the Mexican nationalist uses of *mestizaje* (in Saldaña-Portillo's original essay) as well as her complicity in the developmentalist construction of the revolutionary subject (in the book version). Out of context, the list of items Anzaldúa chooses to keep in her New Mestiza backpack (bark, bone, feathers, drum) could appear to focus on the popular nostalgic images of the paraphernalia that would make one "Indian" and perhaps (but not necessarily) might contribute to the construction of Indianism as a parallel version of Edward Said's *Orientalism*—except, perhaps, because of the presence

of the tape recorder, a “modern” object that disrupts the stereotyping work of the list of kept items. In her own response to Saldaña-Portillo’s essay in a later interview, Anzaldúa acknowledges the danger here:

I think it’s important to consider the uses that appropriations serve. The process of marginalizing others has roots in colonialism. I hate that a lot of us Chicanas/os have Eurocentric assumptions about indigenous traditions. We do to Indian cultures what museums do—impose western attitudes, categories, and terms by decontextualizing objects, symbols and isolating them, disconnecting them from their cultural meaning or intentions, and then reclassifying them within western terms and contexts. (*SAIL* 14³)

Rather than a mere decontextualized grab-bag list, the function of Anzaldúa’s backpack list becomes radically transformed as she continues explaining the processes involved in this appropriative gesture:

Her first step is to take inventory. *Despojando, desgranando, quitando paja*. [Stripping, shelling, removing straw—“separating the wheat from the chaff.”] Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? This weight on her back—which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo? (*Borderlands* 104)

To return to Said’s notion of Orientalism, we should note the ways Said, following Antonio Gramsci, insists on the need to take inventory in order to come to just such an awareness of the historical roots that make up a person’s identity. Said repeats this injunction, one version of which is as follows:

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. The only available translation inexplicably leaves Gramsci’s comment at that, whereas in fact Gramsci’s text concludes by saying, “therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.” (25)

The purpose of Anzaldúa’s backpack, then, is not to serve as the presumed grounding gesture of bourgeois subjectivity—choice—but rather as the decolonizing site at which she can take inventory of the traces of the historical impressions on her very being.

I would argue that Anzaldúa’s appropriations of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* are not strictly *biologized* but rather *socialized*. Anzaldúa’s primary notion of *mestizaje* does not refer to a biological given but rather to a socially-imposed existential condition resulting from life in the borderlands. The function of *mestizaje* in Anzaldúa’s project cannot be reduced to the *mestizaje/indigenismo* binary that structures the *mestizo* as citizen of Mexico. This is primarily so because the location of Anzaldúa’s “territory of *mestizaje*,” so to speak, is not Mexico but the borderlands region of the United States. Whereas in Mexico the *mestizo* is the privileged figure standing in as the nation-state citizen, in the U.S. the *mestizo* is never recognized as such.

This becomes even clearer when we go on to read the passage that follows those above in *Borderlands*:

Pero es difícil [but it is difficult] differentiating between *lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto* [the inherited, the acquired, the imposed]. She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of. [. . .] This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. (104)

In producing the inventory of her own historical positioning, Anzaldúa documents the struggle and, through such documentation, communicates the rupture that marks the new *mestiza*’s rejection of all inherited, acquired, and imposed oppressive systems. Rather than “returning” to her Indigenous roots as some “nostalgic” or “romantic” escape to the past, Anzaldúa uses the knowledge she gains from her inventory as she “reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths.” This is the subaltern process against hegemony,⁴ the transformative Coatlicuean appropriation (deconstructing followed by constructing) of the new *mestiza*’s *nahual*, shape-shifting nature in the molding of a new mode of being:

She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Deconstruct, construct. She becomes a *nahual*, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. She learns to transform the small "I" into the total Self. *Se hace moldeadora de su alma. Según la concepción que tiene de si misma, así será.* [She becomes the molder of her soul. According to the conception she has of herself, so will she be]. (104-5)

Such is the potential power of her decolonizing appropriations at the site of various histories of competing colonizations.

ENDNOTES

1 See my "Coatlicue Appropriations and Transformations: The Decolonizing Strategies of Gloria Anzaldúa & Norma Alarcón."

2 Saldaña-Portillo's essay first appeared in *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, and has subsequently been integrated into Chapter 7 of her book. Page numbers refer to the 2003 book version.

3 This interview, first published in SAIL in 2003, is republished in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (2009). Because of the importance of the placement of this interview among the other SAIL contributions in that issue on "Indigenous Intersections," page references are to the SAIL version.

4 See Laclau and Mouffe.

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