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Gloria Anzaldúa's Hemispheric Performativity Pieces, Shuffles, Layers

Romana Radlwimmer

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CHAPTER 1

Performative Concepts of the Americas

INTRODUCING A THEORY IN MOTION

In the preface to her 1990 anthology *Making Face, Making Soul*, Gloria Anzaldúa programmatically declared theory to be a performative act. She envisioned ideas in the making, thoughts formulated as politically engaged acts, theories maneuvering between different experiences:

Necesitamos teorías that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries – new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods. (Anzaldúa 1990, xxv)

Consequently, Anzaldúa's texts blend diverse notions and narratives. Flows of thought are repeated, varied, rewritten, dismissed, rehabilitated. They collide, they are not stable. Just when one believes to have tracked down and mastered a clear concept, it seems to slip away as swiftly as it appeared. The ideas' only stability seems to be their performativity. As Norma Alarcón wittily noted, Anzaldúa's writing is a conjunctive assemblage, a cornucopia of possibilities which leads readers as herself to follow what they believe "to be one important 'line'" in Anzaldúan textualities (Alarcón 2012, 190). Anzaldúa's destabilized texts on literature, arts,

bodies, identities, spirituality, or cultures require a performative reader which she once defined:

Let the reader beware [...]: s/he must do the work of piecing this text together. The categories in this work reflect our fragmented and interrupted dialogue which is said to be a discontinued and incomplete discourse. The method of organizing the book was largely that of poetic association, another way of organizing experience, one that reflects our lives and the way outminds work. As the perspective and the focus shift, as the topic shifts, the listener/reader is forced to connect the dots, to connect the fragments. (Anzaldúa 1990, xvii–xviii)

The Chicana writer invited readers to arrange the dispersed pieces of thought according to their own understanding, experience, and life horizon. She entitled them to control how ideas evolved and engaged them in performative acts which renewed, reinterpreted, and repositioned concepts every time the receptive process happened.

The transformative quality of Gloria Anzaldúa's theory has long been highlighted by many excellent studies which discussed, for instance, Anzaldúa's oscillating texts regarding her political engagement and her spirituality, as textual hybridity, or sexual and gender identity (Sandoval 2002; Ohmer 2010; Alarcón 2012; Keating 2013; Vivancos Pérez 2013; Carroll 2015; Pitts 2021; Zaytoun 2022). To date, however, little work has thoroughly examined, firstly, in which ways the Chicana writer's last book, *Light in the Dark*, shed new light on the dynamic composition of her textual worlds, and, secondly, how Anzaldúa contributed to a larger hemispheric tendency of performative feminisms. As a result, scholarship on performativity endorses a narrative frequently shaped by well-known earlier works such as *Borderlands* and by a Chicanx and Latinx context. Without an adequate analysis of Anzaldúa's newest conceptualizations of performativity, and without situating the Chicana writer as quintessential figure of a critical juncture of theory making in the Americas, we under-value the impact of Anzaldúa's interventions, ultimately overlooking the wider frame of her lifelong work on transformations. My book, *Pieces, Shuffles, Layers: Gloria Anzaldúa's Hemispheric Performativity*, remedies this gap by investigating the variable approaches to performativity Anzaldúa proposed throughout the years, and by regarding Anzaldúa's work from a hemispheric point of view which locates her theory in the wave of feminist performativity emerging in the Americas at the turn of

the millennium. My close reading of Anzaldúa's texts, contexts, and co-texts brings out the constant changes in her intertwined phases of literary and conceptual production. The text corpus reaches from *This Bridge* and *Making Face* to *Interviews*, *Borderlands* and *Light in the Dark*, and includes other documents and archival papers.

The Chicana writer articulated her notions on fluctuations through what I call "performative concepts" which did not respect the borders of single texts or editions, but organically grew through them. These performative concepts—on questions concerning performativity—arose out of the piecing, shuffling, and layering of her texts. The hard-to-grasp quality of Anzaldúa's "theory always in motion" (Ohmer 2010, 143), or "ebb and flow of varying relations of multiplicity" (Pitts 2021, 12), implied an ethics of transformation which shaped feminist, queer, and decolonial discourse. Chela Sandoval was of the first ones to elaborate on Anzaldúa's perpetual enactment of social and political positionalities (Sandoval 2002, 25). In her comprehensive study on the politically engaged transformative aspects of Anzaldúa's work, AnaLouise Keating highlighted Anzaldúa's relational approach to feminist theory and her employment of a performative language (Keating 2013, 32, 127). Amy Sara Carroll saw *Borderlands*, published in 1987, as "puro performativity," as a "journey, a process, an invitation," and as a queer "text that explodes, implodes, multiplies like female orgasm" (Carroll 2015, 197–198). Norma Alarcón analyzed Anzaldúa's continuous attempt to convert chaos into order and her persistent pursuing of new meaning as a quest for personal and political decolonization (Alarcón 2012, 189–190). In the same line, Sarah Ohmer assessed the decolonial significance of Anzaldúa's "performative, corporal and malleable" texts (Ohmer 2010, 143).

Concentrating on her writing practice shaped by these dynamics, Ricardo Vivancos Pérez pointed out Anzaldúa's relentless dedication to drafting and polishing her texts. *Borderlands* was a milestone in her ongoing search for method, but it was just one step in a larger, lifelong project of ongoing reformulations. Anzaldúa's "thought is performative" because it "emerges as a continuum of accumulations, reformulations, additions, and provisional syntheses" (Vivancos Pérez 2013, 30). Accordingly, Jorge Capetillo-Ponce found a "laundry-list of items" in his notes on Anzaldúa's references, from Marx, Vasconcelos, Said, and Freud to Nietzsche, Foucault, Habermas, Juan Rulfo, Octavio Paz, or Carlos Castañeda (Capetillo-Ponce 2006, 88).

These analyses either shortly mention or centrally analyze the moving quality of Anzaldúa's writing, illustrating the directions Anzaldúa's performativity took. They showed that, among other options, it referred to political engagement, sexuality, spirituality, coloniality, linguistics, and literary drafting or scientific referencing. However, the studies either were conducted before *Light in the Dark* (2015) or did not specifically take into account the performativity of Anzaldúa's posthumously published work and the new dynamics it generated in interaction with her earlier texts. They focused on specific aspects of Anzaldúa's transformations, such as Kelli Zaytoun's meticulous study on the shapeshifting quality of *naguala*—originally a Mesoamerican spiritual concept recovered and rewritten by Anzaldúa—, which, in “its final appearance,” is also a “performance” (Zaytoun 2022, 39). Meanwhile, the present study emphasizes a decolonial and feminist performativity as a broad overarching perspective of Anzaldúa's work, leading through her writing practice and literary theory, determining her body experiences and politics, or designing the cultural spaces she conceptualized. Moreover, this book explores Anzaldúa's performativity as part of a hemispheric tendency. Toward the end of the twentieth century, feminist theory of the Americas incorporated performative categories when approaching and analyzing literary and cultural phenomena. Anzaldúa, thus, participated in an epistemological turn which emanated from places as diverse as the Cono Sur, the Southern Cone of the Hemisphere, the Caribbean, or, as in this case, the Mexican-US borderlands.

In the analysis of the performative it is important, as Norma Alarcón once put it, “to clarify what the shift consists of and for whom” (Alarcón 2003, 404), and, one might add, where and when it is carried out, and by which actors. With *Light in the Dark* in mind and after nearly two decades of experience in the Anzaldúan archives, Alarcón's critical intervention still nudges doubts, and sets the tone for the pivotal research questions of this book: what are the dimensions of Anzaldúa's performativity today? In which ways do her earlier and later performative concepts interact? How does Anzaldúa modify the performative through the years? Do her concepts continuously blur the same boundaries? How has performativity shaped her writing since the 1970s? How do Anzaldúa's transformative notions echo other performative feminisms of the hemisphere?

This study sets out to reevaluate these questions, allowing different time periods of Anzaldúa's literary production to communicate with each other, and investigating the interplay of the discursive and the material

aspects of her performativity. Gloria Anzaldúa participated in what Clifford Geertz called the “alteration of the principles of mapping,” or the production of “hybrid texts” taking place at the end of the twentieth century: Geertz was intrigued by philosophical inquiries looking like literary criticism, by scientific discussions looking like belles lettres, baroque fantasies presented as empirical observations, documentaries that read like true confessions, parables posing as ethnographies, theoretical treatises set out as travelogues, or by epistemological studies constructed like political tracts (Geertz 2000, 19–20). To scholars like Jonathan Culler, such textual hybridity reflects the very nature of theory, a “miscellaneous genre” which succeeds in “reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which” it belongs (Culler 2000, 3). Anzaldúa designed her texts in a hybrid way, blending, for instance, genres, stylistic devices, or themes; however, she also went beyond the creation of ambiguous, hybrid texts as she placed *shifts* at the center of her theory, and at the center of the configuration of her concepts. She articulated her notions on transformations and movements through “performative concepts,” the term I propose to show that her ideas were not limited to a singular text but expanded through several writings and editions. By tracing the complex, changing histories of her concepts, they become—maybe not fully, as they tend to disappear and to reappear somewhere else, but more satisfactorily—graspable.

Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of the performative and her performativity of concepts belong together. Both levels are not necessarily a chain of cause and effect but interact flexibly. Anzaldúa’s way of setting up ideas reflects the phenomena she theorizes, and vice versa. In this sense, performativity appears to be one of Anzaldúa’s central epistemological principles, functioning as a guiding mechanism through her texts, shaping her concepts, asking how to see the invisible, how to stabilize the unstable, how to hold on to constant movement.

HEMISPHERIC PERFORMATIVITY

In the last decades, performativity has emerged as a main theoretic intervention and innovation of theories and fictional writing of the Americas, that is, the so-called Western hemisphere, or the area of the globe west of the prime meridian and east of the International Date Line (National Geographic). “Hemisphere,” and the large continental mass it designates, is far from being an innocent term, but is linked to colonial and nationalist