La conciencia de la mestiza/
Towards a New Consciousness

GLORIA ANZALDÚA

When Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of a “new consciousness,” she’s talking about creating a new self, about experiencing the world in a different way. She envisions a cultural evolution bringing new understandings of race, gender, class, and nationality. And in writing of the mestiza consciousness and the multiple cultures from which it arises, she uses a new language — a hybrid of English, Castilian Spanish, a North Mexican dialect, Tex-Mex, and the Indian language Nahuatl. Anzaldúa is editor of Haciendo Caras: Making Face/Making Soul (1990) and coeditor of This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (1983). This selection is from her book Borderlands — La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987). Although we’ve provided translations, we suggest that you not consult these in your first reading. Concentrate instead on Anzaldúa’s main points and on her innovative blend of argument and poetry, of myth and manifesto.

Por la mujer de mi raza
habló el espíritu. 6

Jose Vasconcelos, Mexican philosopher, envisaged una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas afines, una raza de color — la primera raza síntesis del globo. 5 He called it a cosmic race, la raza cósmica, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world. 4 Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, 5 and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity. At 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

1La conciencia de la mestiza: mestiza consciousness; consciousness of the mestiza (a woman of mixed racial heritage).
2This is my own “take off” on Jose Vasconcelos’ idea. Jose Vasconcelos, La Raza Cósmica: Misión de la Raza Ibero-Americana (México: Aguilar S.A. de Ediciones, 1961). [Author’s note] Por la mujer de mi raza...: the spirit shall speak through the women of my race.
3una raza mestiza...: a multiracial race, a mixture of kindred races, a race of color, the first synthetic race of the world.
4Vasconcelos. [Author’s note]
5The theory of the pure Aryan: the myth espoused by Adolf Hitler and others of the racial superiority of white northern Europeans.

hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural, and biological cross-pollination, an “alien” consciousness is presently in the making — a new mestiza consciousness, una conciencia de mujer. 6 It is a consciousness of the Borderlands.

Una lucha de fronteras / A Struggle of Borders

Because I, a mestiza,
continually walk out of one culture and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan simultáneamente. 7

The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness.

In a constant state of mental neapantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, la mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, 8 and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?

El choque de un alma atrapado entre el mundo del espíritu y el mundo de la técnica a veces la deja entullada. 9 Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference 10 causes un choque, a cultural collision.

6una conciencia de mujer: a female consciousness.
7alma entre dos mundos...: a soul caught between two, three, four worlds. My head aches with contradictions. I’m led north by all the voices that speak to me simultaneously.
8patois: nonstandard dialect.
9El choque de un alma atrapada...: The struggle of a soul trapped between the world of the spirit and the world of technology sometimes leaves it paralyzed.
Within us and within la cultura chicana,\(^1\) 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. Subconsciously, we see an attack on ourselves and our beliefs as a threat and we attempt to block with a counterstance.

But it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant. All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority — outer as well as inner — it’s a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes.\(^2\) Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.

A Tolerance for Ambiguity

These numerous possibilities leave la mestiza floundering in uncharted seas. In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche\(^3\) horizontally and vertically. La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking.\(^4\)

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\(^1\)La cultura chicana: chicana culture.Elsewhere in Borderlands, Anzaldúa writes, “La Cultura chicana identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish). Our faith is rooted in indigenous attributes, images, symbols, magic, and myth” (Chapter 3).

\(^2\)See through serpent and eagle eyes: “The eagle symbolizes the spirit (as the sun, the father); the serpent symbolizes the soul (as the earth, the mother). Together, they symbolize the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/earth/feminine” (Borderlands, Chapter 1).

\(^3\)The psyche: the soul or self.

\(^4\)In part, I derive my definitions for “convergent” and “divergent” thinking from Rothenberg, 12-13. [Author’s note]

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characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes.

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. 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. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.

She can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence. I’m not sure exactly how. The work takes place underground — subconsciously. It is work that the soul performs. That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness — a mestiza consciousness — and though 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.

En unas pocas centurias,\(^5\) the future will belong to the mestiza. Because the future depends on the breaking down of the paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos — that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave — la mestiza creates a new consciousness.

The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.

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El camino de la mestiza
The Mestiza Way

Caught between the sudden contraction, the breath sucked in and the endless space, the brown woman stands still, looks at the sky. She

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\(^5\)En unas pocas centurias: in a few centuries.
decides to go down, digging her way along the roots of trees. Sifting through the bones, she shakes them to see if there is any marrow in them. Then, touching the dirt to her forehead, to her tongue, she takes a few bones, leaves the rest in their burial place.

She goes through her backpack, keeps her journal and address book, throws away the muni-bart metromaps.16 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,17 eagle feather, snakeskin, tape recorder, the rattle and drum in her pack and she sets out to become the complete tolteca.18

Her first step is to take inventory. Despojando, desgranando, quitando paja.19 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?

Pero es difícil20 differentiating between lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto.21 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. Luego bota lo que no vale, los desmientos, los desencuentros, el embutimiento. Aguarda el juicio, hondo y enraizado, de la gente antigua.22 This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the 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,23 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 sí misma, así será.24

16muni-bart metromaps: maps of bus and rail transportation in the San Francisco Bay area.
17hierbas: herbs.
18Gina Valdés, Puentes y Fronteras: Coplas Chicanas (Los Angeles, CA: Castle Lithograph, 1982), 2. [Author’s note] tolteca: the Toltec empire predates the Aztec in ancient Mexico. Anzaldúa associates the Toltecs with more woman-centered culture and religion than those of the warlike, patriarchal Aztecs.
19Despojando, desgranando, quitando paja: Stripping, removing the grain or the straw.
20Pero es difícil: But it is difficult.
21lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto: the inherited, the acquired, the imposed.
22Luego bota lo que no vale . . . : Then she discards whatever is useless, falsehoods and brutality. She waits for the deep, probing common sense of the ancient people.
23nahual: sorceress.
24Se hace moldeadora . . . : She is able to mold her soul. Whatever image she has of herself, so she will be.

Que no se nos olvide los hombres25

“Tú no sirves pa' nada26 —
you’re good for nothing.
Eres pura vieja.”27

“You’re nothing but a woman” means you are defective. Its opposite is to be un macho. The modern meaning of the word “machismo,” as well as the concept, is actually an Anglo invention. For men like my father, being “macho” meant being strong enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love. Today’s macho has doubts about his ability to feed and protect his family. His “machismo” is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem. It is the result of hierarchical male dominance. The Anglo, feeling inadequate and inferior and powerless, displaces or transfers these feelings to the Chicano by shaming him. In the Gringo28 world, the Chicano suffers from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of self and self-deprecation. Around Latinos he suffers from a sense of language inadequacy and its accompanying discomfort; with Native Americans he suffers from a racial amnesia which ignores our common blood, and from guilt because the Spanish part of him took their land and oppressed them. He has an excessive compensatory hubris29 when around Mexicans from the other side. It overlays a deep sense of racial shame.

The loss of a sense of dignity and respect in the macho breeds a false machismo which leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them. Coexisting with his sexist behavior is a love for the mother which takes precedence over that of all others. Devoted son, macho pig. To wash down the shame of his acts, of his very being, and to handle the brute in the mirror, he takes to the bottle, the snort, the needle, and the fist.

Though we “understand” the root causes of male hatred and fear, and the subsequent wounding of women, we do not excuse, we do not condone, and we will no longer put up with it. From the men of our race, we demand the admission/acknowledgment/disclosure/testimony that they wound us, violate us, are afraid of us and of our power. We need them to say they will begin to eliminate their hurtful put-down ways. But more than the words, we demand acts. We say to them: We will develop equal power with you and those who have shamed us.

It is imperative that mestizas support each other in changing the
sexist elements in the Mexican-Indian culture. As long as woman is put down, the Indian and the Black in all of us is put down. The struggle of the mestiza is above all a feminist one. As long as los hombres think they have to chingar mujeres and each other to be men, as long as men are taught that they are superior and therefore culturally favored over la mujer, as long as to be a vieja is a thing of derision, there can be no real healing of our psyches. We’re halfway there — we have such love of the Mother, the good mother. The first step is to unlearn the puta/virgen dichotomy and to see Coatlapeuh-Coatlicue in the Mother, Guadalupe.

Tenderness, a sign of vulnerability, is so feared that it is showered on women with verbal abuse and blows. Men, 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 and to challenge the current masculinity. I’ve encountered a few scattered and isolated gentle straight men, the beginnings of a new breed, but they are confused, and entangled with sexist behaviors that they have not been able to eradicate. We need a new masculinity and the new man needs a movement.

Lumping the males who deviate from the general norm with man, the oppressor, is a gross injustice. Asombra pensar que nos hemos quedado en ese pozo oscuro donde el mundo encierra a las lesbianas. Asombra pensar que hemos, como femenistas y lesbianas, cerrado nuestros corazones a los hombres, a nuestros hermanos los jotos, desheredados y marginales como nosotros. Being the supreme crossers of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia, and the rest of the planet. We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other — the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials. It is to transfer ideas and information from one culture to another. Colored homosexuals have more knowledge of other cultures; have always been at the forefront (although sometimes in the closet) of all liberation struggles in this country; have suffered more injustices and have survived them despite all odds. Chicanos need to acknowledge the political and artistic contributions of their queer. People, listen to what your jotería is saying.

The mestizo and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls.

Somos una gente

Hay tantísimas fronteras
que dividen a la gente,
pero por cada frontera
existe también un puente.

— Gina Valdés

Divided Loyalties

Many women and men of color do not want to have any dealings with white people. It takes too much time and energy to explain to the downwardly mobile, white middle-class women that it’s okay for us to want to own “possessions,” never having had any nice furniture on our dirt floors or “luxuries” like washing machines. Many feel that whites should help their own people rid themselves of race hatred and fear first. I, for one, choose to use some of my energy to serve as mediator. I think we need to allow whites to be our allies. Through our literature, art, corridos, and folktales we must share our history with them so when they set up committees to help Big Mountain Navajos or the Chicano farmworkers or los Nicaragüenses they won’t turn people away because of their racial fears and ignorances. They will come to see that they are not helping us but following our lead.

Individually, but also as a racial entity, we need to voice our needs. We need to say to white society: we need you to accept the fact that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us. We need you to own the fact that you looked upon us as less than...
human, that you stole our lands, our personhood, our self-respect. We need you to make public restitution: to say that, to compensate for your own sense of defectiveness, you strive for power over us, you erase our history and our experience because it makes you feel guilty — you'd rather forget your brutish acts. To say you've split yourself from minority groups, that you disown us, that your dual consciousness splits off parts of yourself, transferring the “negative” parts onto us. (Where there is persecution of minorities, there is shadow projection. Where there is violence and war, there is repression of shadow.) To say that you are afraid of us, that to put distance between us, you wear the mask of contempt. Admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her. Gringo, accept the doppelganger in your psyche. By taking back your collective shadow the intracultural split will heal. And finally, tell us what you need from us.

By Your True Faces We Will Know You

I am visible — see this Indian face — yet I am invisible. I both blind them with my beak nose and am their blind spot. But I exist, we exist. They'd like to think I have melted in the pot. But I haven't, we haven't.

The dominant white culture is killing us slowly with its ignorance. By taking away our self-determination, it has made us weak and empty. As a people we have resisted and we have taken expedient positions, but we have never been allowed to develop unencumbered — we have never been allowed to be fully ourselves. The whites in power want us people of color to barricade ourselves behind our separate tribal walls so they can pick us off one at a time with their hidden weapons; so they can whitewash and distort history. Ignorance splits people, creates prejudices. A misinformed people is a subjugated people.

Before the Chicano and the undocumented worker and the Mexican from the other side can come together, before the Chicanos can have unity with Native Americans and other groups, we need to know the history of their struggle and they need to know ours. Our mothers, our sisters and brothers, the guys who hang out on street corners, the children in the playgrounds, each of us must know our Indian lineage, our afro-mestiza, our history of resistance.

To the immigrant mexicano and the recent arrivals we must teach our history. The 80 million mexicanos and the Latinos from Central and South America must know of our struggles. Each one of us must know basic facts about Nicaragua, Chile, and the rest of Latin America. The Latinoist movement (Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Spanish-speaking people working together to combat racial discrimination in the market place) is good but it is not enough. Other than a common culture we will have nothing to hold us together. We need to meet on a broader communal ground.

The struggle is 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. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.

Engaging the Text

1. What does Anzaldua mean by “mestiza consciousness”? Why does she think such a new consciousness is necessary? What risks and rewards does she associate with a mestiza consciousness?

2. The concept of the mestiza, like the myth of the melting pot, involves the coming together of two or more cultures. How does the idea of mestiza consciousness differ from the melting pot metaphor?

3. How does Anzaldua define the concept of machismo in this essay? How does it connect to the idea of mestiza consciousness? Why, according to Anzaldua, are homosexuals important to this new way of thinking?

4. In paragraph 7, Anzaldua distinguishes between a western mode of thinking, which she considers narrow and inadequate, and a more comprehensive “divergent” mode of thought. Do you think a person trained in traditional western thought can or should learn to think differently?

5. Discuss the effects of Anzaldua’s frequent use of Spanish, her mix of prose and poetry, her references to Mexican/Indian deities and folktales, her movement between vivid image and broad generalization, and other distinctive elements of her essay.

Exploring Connections

6. Write a dialogue between Anzaldua and Virginia R. Harris and Trinity A. Ordoña (p. 359) on cross-racial hostility. Does mestiza consciousness offer an alternative to such hostilities?