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### The Politics of Language and the Legitimacy of Hybrid Identities

Chicana feminist, and cultural and queer theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa, asks in her essay “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” “how do you take a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down” (33-34)? Published as part of a collection of essays in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Anzaldúa explores how language and identity are deeply intertwined. In the questions quoted above, Anzaldúa points out the way Chicane Americans are shamed for speaking Spanglish (a combination of Spanish and English). Though published over thirty years ago, the border issues highlighted in this essay that Chicane Americans struggle with, continue to impact not only Chicane Americans, but all Latine Americans, and other Americans of hybrid identities. Queer Black Mexican American poet Ariana Brown’s poem “Dear White Girls in My Spanish Class” exemplifies these border issues through a series of questions the poem’s speaker directs at a group of white girls in their Spanish class. These questions serve to expose the interlocking racist and classist notions these girls hold towards Spanish and Latine Americans. However, while the speaker directs their questions towards these white girls, and by extension white Americans as a whole, the issues they raise regarding language points to the ways the hybrid ethnoracial and linguistic identity of Latine Americans is delegitimized by both monolingual English and Spanish speakers respectively. This highlights the border issues Latine Americans continue to struggle with today, calling attention to the way language proficiency is used to delegitimize hybrid identities.

Something important to keep in consideration when analyzing either Anzaldúa's essay and Brown's poem is why Latine Americans speak any of the languages that they do. This is an important moment in the poem when the speaker addresses this painful history. They point out that neither Spanish nor English is their "native tongue" as a Latine American, and that these "languages [they] speak are bursting with blood" (Brown 26-27). Both languages were violently brought to the Americas through Western colonialism and imperialism, along with other European languages including, but not exclusive to, Portuguese and French. Thus, to speak any of these languages as an American and/or member of the Latine community (regardless of nationality) is a continuation of this legacy. This history, however, is lost on the white girls in the speaker's Spanish class. Instead, because they associate Spanish with "poor brown people," rather than the European colonizers whom the language originates from, they assume Spanish is not sophisticated like French (Brown 12-14). If it were not for this association, Spanish would likely share a similar esteemed position as English or French does in American society. However, because Spanish is linked to Latines who are considered lower in status to white people, it too is considered inferior to English and other languages associated with whiteness. By bluntly pointing out these prejudices, the speaker reveals the interlocking racism and classism that informs these biased notions. They also further point out that just as there is an ethnoracial hierarchy in the United States, there is also a linguistic hierarchy linked to the former. This is another example of how marginalized groups and everything associated with each respective group are deemed inferior to whiteness.

The speaker further points out the significance of the privilege ones hold (or lack of it) as dictated by the aforementioned hierarchies, and the implications this holds for Latine Americans. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker asks the white girls, "What is it like... / To not be

expected to speak better than you do” (Brown 44-45)? While this is meant to primarily highlight the ethnoracial and linguistic privileges these girls hold as white Americans, this also highlights how Latine Americans are constantly caught between pressures from two sides. On one side, they are expected to assimilate into the dominant English-speaking, white culture and society of America (Brown 16-17). And on the other side, despite these assimilation pressures, they are also expected to speak a ‘pure’ version of the language linked with the Latin American nation of their descent by other Latines, especially Latines living outside of the United States (Brown 45). These pressures in turn highlight how language proficiency has long been used as a kind of metric to assess whether someone is sufficiently of a particular identity. This is problematic for a variety of reasons: 1) because it implies that identity is quantifiable and therefore can be measured; and 2) the metric often used to measure a person’s identity maintains harmful hierarchies of race/ethnicity.

If identity cannot be quantified, and thus measured, and if identity ‘metrics’ maintain harmful hierarchies, this raises the question of why this is done in the first place. Writer Jacqueline Delgadillo contends that “[l]anguage proficiency is [a] form of gatekeeping Latinidad.” Though Delgadillo discusses this issue specifically as it pertains to Latinidad, her point is also applicable to constructions of American identity in the United States. It is notable that when referring to white Americans, they are often, if not always, referred to as simply “Americans,” as oppose to Americans of color who are referred to by a variety of names (which are sometimes hyphenated), including, but not exclusive to, “African Americans,” “Asian Americans,” and so on. This demonstrates how American-ness and whiteness are treated as synonymous to one another. Thus, the only ‘proper’ way to be American is white. As already touched upon a little in the paragraphs above, language proficiency is linked with ethnoracial

hierarchies that privilege whiteness in the United States, and devalues non-white peoples (regardless of which language they speak). In America, for example, it is not unusual for peoples from non-English speaking cultures to be told to “speak ‘American’” (Anzaldúa 34). This demand is a common method used to shame peoples from non-English speaking cultures for not speaking English ‘properly,’ that is, like white people. And people who are judged to not adequately speak like white people are labeled ‘lazy,’ ‘unintelligent,’ and ‘un-American.’ This is why in order to avoid such labels, some choose to discontinue speaking in the language linked to their ethnic culture, fearing that they and/or their children will be discriminated against, as the speaker of Brown’s poem explains their grandmother did with her children (Brown 16-17). All this merely further demonstrates the racist and xenophobic sentiments that inform how the identity being gatekept from non-white peoples is centered on whiteness in the United States.

However, it is not only American identity that is being gatekept from the speaker and other Latine Americans, but *Latinidad* as well. Similar to the United States, the expectation for Latine Americans to speak ‘pure’ Spanish or whichever language primarily spoken in a specific Latin American country are a reflection of the region’s colonial and imperial history. As already discussed above, English, Spanish, and other European languages are spoken in the Americas because of Western colonialism and imperialism. And linguistic hierarchies established during this period were created alongside an ethnoracial hierarchy based on a person’s relationship to the country responsible for colonizing their lands (Delaney). Thus, using language proficiency to gatekeep *Latinidad* upholds the same ethnoracial hierarchy that was used to privilege Europeans (especially those born in Europe), and oppress non-white peoples in colonized lands. Linguist Ana Celia Zentella, who takes an anthro-political approach to her research, highlights how those who speak Spanglish are accused of ‘damaging’ themselves and the Spanish language by mixing

Spanish and English together (31). While Zentella focuses much of her criticism for the continued negative attitudes against Spanglish and its speakers towards the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE), an institution dedicated to preserving the ‘purity’ of Spanish and whose members are made up of primarily old men from Spain, linguist Eugenia Casielles-Suárez notes how these attitudes are also perpetuated by monolingual Spanish-speaking Latines (24; 147). It is unsurprising that the former group would perpetuate such negative attitudes as these attitudes uphold the same systems of oppression that helped Spain maintain power in colonized lands. In the case of Latines, though, especially Latines of non-European ancestry, perpetuating these negative attitudes, even if unwittingly, only serves to maintain the interlocking systems of oppression that devalue them. They also contribute to the further marginalization of Latines living in countries such as the United States who must contend with expectations to speak ‘pure’ English and Spanish respectively, and never mix the two together. However, even if Latine Americans are able to speak ‘pure’ English and Spanish, it is unreasonable (as well as racist) to demand that they not speak Spanglish if it is the language they feel best expresses their hybrid identity.

Another important theme explored in Brown’s poem is the pain that results from someone’s hybrid identity being continually delegitimized. Anzaldúa explains that Chicane Spanish and other forms of Spanglish arose out of a need for a language that more adequately expressed the hybrid experience of Chicane Americans (35-36). In addition to this explanation, her description of Chicane Spanish as “an orphan tongue”—owed to its perceived “mutilation” of the Spanish language—raises an interesting question (Anzaldúa 35, 38). To call Chicane Spanish, and by extension other forms of Spanglish, “orphan” would suggest that the parent languages that birthed them are dead. However, both English and Spanish are still very much

living languages, as are the other European languages brought to the Americas. It is not so much, then, that Chicane Spanish is orphaned as so much the speakers of these parent languages refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of its various Spanglish offspring. This is because Chicane Spanish and other Spanglish variants do not conform to the exact likeness of their parent languages, a likeness which is linked to the ethnoracial identity of the speakers who these languages originate from. Instead, these languages are as hybrid as the people who speak them. And hybridity challenges neat racial and ethnic categories, particularly in the United States.

Further, the existence of Spanglish and other hybrid languages demonstrates that privileged groups cannot control the speakers of hybrid languages. Zentella explains that this points to how

the denunciation of Spanglish—the way of speaking and/or the label... makes clear that issues of power are at the root of the debates. Who has the power to decide which language varieties, ways of speaking, and labels are correct, and which speakers are damaging the language(s) and even themselves. (Zentella 39)

Spanglish and other hybrid languages shatters the illusion that privileged groups, such as white Americans, can control devalued groups inevitably (in this case through language), such as Latine Americans. In short, it reveals the limits of the privileged group's power over the devalued groups. Hybridity, then, in all the forms that it takes, threatens the longstanding ethnoracial and linguistic hierarchies that were established to privilege peoples from colonial and imperial powers and their descendants. Ironically, hybridity is an inevitable result of the contact between different peoples, cultures, and languages that resulted from Western colonialism and imperialism. Indian British scholar, literary critic, and critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha's points this relationship out in his discussion on hybridity, explaining that while

hybridity... bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation... The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. (211)

Important to this “new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” is that it is one dictated by hybrid individuals, and not by the “traces” that inform the hybridity of these individuals. Hybridity cannot be “train[ed] ... to be quiet,” to be “bridle[d] and saddle[d],” to be “ma[de] ... [to] lie down” (Anzaldúa 33-34). More and more Spanglish speakers, for example are claiming their hybrid identity and Spanglish as their own, as Anzaldúa had hoped for in her essay (Delgado; Casielles-Suárez 162; 40). This is one thing that the speaker of Brown’s poem does not do, who hopes that Spanish “will choose [them] back someday” (43). It is understandable why the speaker would wish for this. Hybridity can place a person in a state of identity limbo. However, Spanish as it is often taught in the classroom is arguably inadequate to fully express the speaker’s hybrid identity, who on top of being Latine American through their mother, is African American through their father (39-40).

The assertion that one must speak Spanish or English ‘properly’ in order to be considered fully Latine or American respectively has been used far too long to deny Latine Americans the legitimacy of their hybrid identity. Hybridity is not only an equally legitimate way to be Latine *and* American, but it is also the inevitable result of Western colonialism and imperialism. Latine Americans, and all other hybrid individuals, have a right to define and navigate their identity as they see fit. They also have a right to speak any language which best reflects their identity.

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