

# Borderlands as a Site of Resistance in Gloria Anzaldúa’s Political Thought

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## Abstract

The essay offers a deeper understanding of Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorization of borderlands, crisis, mobility, and resistance as a theory for coalition making among women of color. Through an analysis of Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of borderlands, strongly rooted in the socio-political context of the United States in the 1980s, the article deals with Anzaldúa’s innovative resignification of crisis and mobility as constitutive elements of political and coalition-making processes. Anzaldúa’s reconfiguration of borders and borderlands, and her intersectional analysis of politics, should be understood as a crucial formulation in the development of the U.S. multiracial and transnational feminist movement.

**Keywords:** Gloria Anzaldúa; Borderlands; Migration; Coalition Politics; Multiracial Feminism.

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## 1 Introduction: Searching for a Politics of Mobility and Resistance

Gloria Anzaldúa's work has been widely discussed in the academic world as her theories on borderlands and *mestiza* consciousness have been crucial in opening new directions in several academic fields, specifically, in cultural studies, ethnic studies, border studies, and gender studies. While her critique of subject formation has been deeply investigated in its relationship with identity-making processes, her constant rejection of identity as a base for political action and subject formation *in the borderlands* has been widely overlooked. In this regard, it is not sufficient to state that the subject in Anzaldúa's work is "non-unitary," as Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano and Norma Alarcón claim.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Anzaldúa's borderlands have often been identified as a site of identity formation, yet her description of identity is neither unitary nor stable, since it is constantly reshaped and shifting. If we look at identity in its etymological meaning as "being the same as oneself," the constant rejection of dichotomies and fixed categories, and the endless shifting of position which is prefigured in the borderlands, make Anzaldúa a theorist of identity rejection. Yet, *Chicanas* subjectivity and struggle for liberation has been discussed as individual and located in a "third space," as Emma Pérez<sup>2</sup> maintains. In a similar way, Anzaldúa's description of coalition-making processes in the borderlands has generally been the theoretical base for the process of liberation for *Chicana* feminists to find a collective voice as *mestizas* within the interstices of other movements. However, if we dwell upon Anzaldúa's description of borderlands and interstices, women's complete liberation cannot take place within borderlands as a counterstance based on dichotomic positions.<sup>3</sup> Nor it can be achieved in private but, instead, it must be achieved by means of a collective stance of "colored and white men and women."<sup>4</sup> A process which demands interaction between shifting political positions.

By employing primary and secondary sources, this paper presents a new interpretation of Anzaldúa's theory on borderlands and coalition by focusing on mobility as a permanent element in the interaction between political subjects that is formed in the borderlands and on the process of coalition-making. Additionally, this essay attempts to explore the relevance of Anzaldúa's thought in shaping multiracial feminist activism in the United States. First, Anzaldúa's definition of borderlands and *mestiza* consciousness as rooted in a crisis that materializes as a constant rejection of identity is discussed. Second, her theory of coalition in the borderlands as "politics of mobility from the interstices" is considered. It is argued that Anzaldúa does not consider resistance to be an act which culminates in the interstices. Instead, although resistance originates in the borderlands, it aspires to go beyond the edges of the border-space. By rejecting identity-based definitions of the political subject and seeing resistance as taking place not only inside the borderlands, Anzaldúa envisions coalition as a process of negotiation between shifting notions of differences and commonalities. Finally, this paper discusses multiracial feminism, especially in the 1990s, as an approach that was strongly influenced by Anzaldúa's thought on coalition-building, grounded on the centrality of women of color as political subjects.

## 2 Crisis and Identity: Subject Formation, Mestiza Consciousness and Mobility

Anzaldúa's definition of borders and borderlands is based on her personal and political experience as a *Chicana* woman. In fact, by living as an outsider in political movements and in different social realities, she comes to understand the alienating effects of the chaotic intertwining of different systems of op-

1. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Cultural studies," difference," and the non-unitary subject," *Cultural Critique*, 28 (1994): 5-28; Norma Alarcón, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism," in *Criticism in the Borderlands. Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*, ed. Hector Calderon and José David Saldivar (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 37.
2. Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas Into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
3. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 78-9.
4. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar, or Island. Lesbians-of-Color Hacienda Alianzas," in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 155.

pression, belonging and allegiance, and she becomes able to theorize the risks and the opportunities for her political and personal emancipation.

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. [...] 'Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement,' say the members of my race. 'Your allegiance is to the Third World,' say my Black and Asian friends. 'Your allegiance is to your gender, to women,' say the feminists. [...] What am I? A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings. They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label.<sup>5</sup>

This description reflects the condition of the borderlands that she describes in her most widely known work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, since borderlands emerge "whenever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy."<sup>6</sup> This definition arises from the dialectic between those 'invisible' societal borders and the historical materiality of the U.S.-Mexican border, described as a "*thin edge of barbwire*," a "*1,950 mile-long open wound*" controlled by border patrols (*la migra*). The reference to an open wound allows Anzaldúa to narrate a different and conflictual history, and to address the contemporary process of militarization of the U.S.-Mexican border.<sup>7</sup> In describing Mexican migrants as a people *rightfully returning* to their original land, which "was Mexican once, was Indian always and is. And will be again,"<sup>8</sup> she recovers a forgotten history and unveils the contradictions of neoliberal globalization, hidden by the political discourse on 'illegal' immigration. Furthermore, while the free crossing of individuals is sanctioned and rejected by policies of massive deportation, the passage of goods, capital, and cheap, controlled labor is encouraged as a crucial element for development and national growth, creating experiences of exploitation on both sides of the Southern border.

Anzaldúa defines the subject of her transformative theory within a game of mirrors between the concrete experience of border-crossers at the Southern border and the reality of borders within the U.S. society. While she attempts to speak to all *Chicanas*, women of color and white women in the United States, she articulates the possibility of resistance from the specific position of "*la mojada, la mujer indocumentada*,"<sup>9</sup> whose situation is associated with the woman of color. As an 'undocumented' migrant woman is doubly threatened and dwells in an unsafe environment, similarly a woman of color does not feel safe and is alienated both in her own culture and in the dominant culture. Due to multiple rejections, this alienation defines the borderlands in which migrants and women of color live. In fact, borderlands are places of crisis for Anzaldúa, where "two or more forces clash and are held teetering on the verge of chaos, a state of *entreguerras*."<sup>10</sup>

Anzaldúa's borderlands are not comfortable places to be in since they are products of oppression and reproduce a "*a shock culture, a border culture, a third country, a closed country*."<sup>11</sup> To be in the borderlands means to be in a continuous status of reiteration of non-belonging, of difference, and of alienation; to be in a place of contradiction, violence, and exploitation. Anzaldúa defines this space of the borderlands as *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word meaning "*tierra entre medio*," "a constant state of transition."<sup>12</sup> Based on this description of chaos, difference, and transition, several scholars, including Gabriela

5. Gloria Anzaldúa, "La Prieta," in *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 205.

6. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, ix.

7. Timothy J. Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992. Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home* (Austin: University of Texas Press—CMAS Book, 1996), 4.

8. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 3.

9. *Ibid.*, 13.

10. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Border Arte," in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro. Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 56.

11. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 11.

12. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

Arredondo and Aída Hurtado,<sup>13</sup> have looked at borderlands as the site in which a hybrid identity, the *mestiza*, is produced. Yet, as Suzanne Bost cautions,<sup>14</sup> the chaotic and critical dimension of the borderlands should not lead us to interpret Anzaldúa's theoretical project of the *mestiza* consciousness as a glorification of hybridity and post-modern subjectivity. In fact, borderlands are a site of undefined boundaries, of dangers and misunderstandings, a precarious environment where paradigmatic divisions, such as the one between friend and enemy, do not hold and where the queer and the outcast find their home. It is a different kind of chaos, when compared with the celebration of hybridity as a freed identity, which several post-modern authors glorify. De Genova, in describing the condition of Mexican migrants in the United States, discusses their lives as characterized by a condition of constant "deportability,"<sup>15</sup> while Anzaldúa's borderlands depict that sense of fear and uncertainty. In fact, Anzaldúa defines border people by their being in an in-between state, by their difference and "abnormality," that is constantly highlighted and *punished* for not conforming to the dominant culture and their culture:

The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the *mulato*, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the *confines* of the 'normal.' Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot.<sup>16</sup>

Anzaldúa describes how living in the borderlands and in the margins pushes women of color to develop a *mestiza* consciousness based on *la facultad*, the ability to "see from two or more perspectives simultaneously."<sup>17</sup> This consciousness is born by refusing to identify with one "side" of the border or one set of cultural norms and develops from claiming a plurality of belonging, in Anzaldúa's case, as "*hispana india negra española ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata*, half-breed."<sup>18</sup> As Hurtado points out, being an "outsider within,"<sup>19</sup> and the "ability to hold multiple social perspectives while simultaneously maintaining a center that revolves around concrete material forms of oppression,"<sup>20</sup> are two sides of the *mestiza* consciousness. Yet, in asserting similarities between the *mestiza* consciousness with W.E.B. Du Bois' double consciousness, Hurtado and Martinez<sup>21</sup> fail to address the contradictory dimension of Anzaldúa's proposal. In fact, while carrying a similar wounding reminiscence of oppression and sharing "the dilemma of the mixed breed,"<sup>22</sup> Anzaldúa's inner "struggle of identities"<sup>23</sup> is among several identities. The conflict does not end with a "pacified" identity combination of being *Chicana* and

13. Gabriela F. Arredondo and Aída Hurtado, "Introduction. Chicana Feminisms at the Crossroads: Disruption in Dialogue," in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gabriela F. Arredondo and Aída Hurtado (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 5.

14. Suzanne Bost, "Gloria Anzaldúa's Mestiza Pain. Mexican Sacrifice, Chicana Embodiment, and Feminist Politics," *Aztlan*, 30, 2 (2005): 8-9.

15. Nicholas De Genova, "The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant 'Illegality,'" *Latino Studies*, 2 (2004): 161-62.

16. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 3-4.

17. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift... the Path of Conocimiento... Inner Work, Public Acts," in *This bridge We Call Home. Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 548.

18. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 194-95.

19. Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems*, 33 (1986): S14-S32.

20. Aída Hurtado, *Voicing Chicana Feminism: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 15.

21. Aída Hurtado, "The Landscape and Language of Chicana Feminisms," in *Routledge Handbook of Chicana/o Studies*, ed. Francisco Lomelí et al. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 332-46, 335; Theresa A. Martinez, "Making Oppositional Culture, Making Standpoint. A Journey into Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands," *Sociological Spectrum*, 25 (2005): 560-61.

22. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 78.

23. *Ibid.*, 78.

American. It generates a consciousness which is not a sum of two “unreconciled strivings,”<sup>24</sup> since the creation of a *mestiza* consciousness is not a process culminating in a successful reconstruction. Anzaldúa sees the possibility for a new consciousness, not an identity, to emerge<sup>25</sup> from the split caused by this inner struggle, namely, a point of view and not an identity. The contradictory dynamic operating within Anzaldúa’s theory of *mestiza*, borders, and identity becomes visible in tension. The point I want to make here is that while Anzaldúa is trying to put together the pieces<sup>26</sup> to solve the identity dilemma which originates in the borderlands, she is constantly forced to deny the formation of a specific identity for the purpose of maintaining a wider perspective. For Anzaldúa there is no possible stabilization of identity in the borderlands; moreover, it can only be temporary and collective if we take seriously the claim that *nepantla* is a state of constant transition, Anzaldúa’s understanding of identity as relational and her encouragement to break down boundaries. The refusal to “pick” one identity, one side, which takes place in the borderlands, is the very refusal of the category of identity itself. This refusal, indeed, becomes a methodology for developing a different and oppositional stance from which Anzaldúa questions the crucial categories of modernity.

Yarbro-Bejarano and Alarcón<sup>27</sup> correctly define Anzaldúa’s subject as non-unitary. The disarticulation of the subject, caused by the condition of crisis of the borderlands as an epistemic space built on knowledge of past and present oppressions, becomes the only possible subjective movement and proceeds through continuous shifting. Indeed, this procedural path expresses the construction of identity, as well, in Anzaldúa’s borderlands, or rather the continuous breakdown. Still, as it has been pointed out by Linda Alcoff,<sup>28</sup> her call for the deconstruction of social and identity categories does not fit completely into the creation of a post-modern subject. In fact, Anzaldúa proposes a spatial, although temporary and mobile, definition of her positioning by reframing identity definitions with the materiality of the body. What I want to stress here is that, while expressing the fragmentation imposed by a history of colonization, alienation, and discrimination in the borderlands, Anzaldúa refuses that imposed fragmented position and engages in an endless dynamic of putting together pieces which, however, can culminate in the formation of a new identity only by renouncing the consciousness of the borderlands—a price she is not willing to pay.

By refusing to choose one of the sides of the border, Anzaldúa avoids falling into a “neither/nor”<sup>29</sup> dilemma since, as border-dwellers, she has learnt how to live with ambiguities and contradictions. This oppositional and marginal position becomes a creative site. Through the act of crossing it is possible to question boundaries and to observe contradictions and understand how different systems of oppression interact. Being in an endless state of crisis, in constant transition,<sup>30</sup> becomes politically productive as it brings up unresolved conflicts and unveils reality. From a privileged, although costly, position, border subjects become able to question authorities and the societal boundaries that constitute the limits of their political action. The *mestiza* consciousness enables the questioning of paradigmatic definitions, such as the “myth of the inferiority of *mujeres*,”<sup>31</sup> to “rebel and rail against [one’s own] culture,”<sup>32</sup> and to unveil how reality is experienced “from a particular perspective and a specific time and place (history), not as a fixed feature of personality or identity.”<sup>33</sup>

24. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 3.

25. Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us Shift,” 548.

26. Gloria Anzaldúa and Andrea Lunsford, “Towards a Mestiza Rhetoric. Gloria Anzaldúa on Composition, Postcoloniality, and the Spiritual. An Interview with Andrea Lunsford,” in *Interviews/Intervistas*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2000), 280.

27. Yarbro-Bejarano, “Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*,” 5-28; Alarcón, “The Theoretical Subject(s),” 37.

28. Linda Martín Alcoff, “The Unassimilated Theorist,” *PMLA*, 121 (2006): 257.

29. Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry. Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 94.

30. Gloria Anzaldúa, “Let Us Be the Healing of the Wound. The Coyolxauhqui Imperative – la Sombra y el Sueño,” in Keating, *Light in the Dark*, 17.

31. Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us Shift,” 549.

32. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 21.

33. Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us Shift,” 549.

### 3 Borderlands as a Site of Resistance: Shaping Coalition from the Interstices

Still, the risk of being “petrified” in the in-betweens and in the margins, to be forcefully kept in the borderlands, to reiterate a traumatic identity and become unable to cross from one side of the border to the other is concrete. While many scholars have addressed the importance of understanding Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of the borderlands in order to describe and stabilize identity-making processes,<sup>34</sup> which Wendy Brown would probably define as a masochistic reproduction of traumatized identities,<sup>35</sup> it would be superficial to forget the political and revolutionary element of Anzaldúa’s theory. Anzaldúa’s coalitions are primarily political both because political is the rejection of identity which takes place in the borderlands, continuously practiced by border subjects in cultural groups and in the women’s movement, and because the need of coalitions and alliances comes from an understanding of violence and inequality as being structural. Thus, Anzaldúa’s border-dweller subjects are caught in a plural dynamic: while making their difference visible, they continuously seek coalitions. As Aída Hurtado rightly puts it, “coalition building is necessary because structural oppression is far from being dismantled”<sup>36</sup> and, I claim, it is necessary to understand how different systems of oppression operate simultaneously and create different effects on different subjects. Closing in separated cultural identities or putting them in coalitions based only on culture, which Anzaldúa criticizes since they risk becoming exclusionary,<sup>37</sup> means falling into a dynamic of reaction again, without being able to articulate an autonomous, stable political prerogative. This does not mean that Anzaldúa does not envision a project for *Chicana*’ liberation within their culture. She does. What I argue is that this process is intrinsically connected with a wider emancipatory process which should be addressed by looking within the tensions between a specific cultural dimension and a broader liberation for women from group boundaries and systemic oppression. Thus, Anzaldúa conceives coalitions as the way to challenge the boundaries of dualistic thinking, based on the action-reaction dynamic, and that this can only be done by having multiple perspectives resulting from different positions. As Anzaldúa notices, coalition-making requires more than an “oppositional consciousness”<sup>38</sup> or a “differential consciousness,”<sup>39</sup> as stated by Sonia Saldívar-Hull and Chela Sandoval. It requires the willingness and the ability to cross over from one culture to another, it demands a collective stand that is based on political, not cultural, commonalities. It requires, then, a “politics of mobility” to express a specificity.

Discussing the ability to move beyond frontiers, Anzaldúa addresses the contemporary critique of women of color toward white and mainstream feminism while simultaneously recognizing the different and mobile positions that political subjects occupy in different spaces. Coalitions, however, cannot be pursued in separated spaces. Therefore, coalitions and alliances are not possibilities, but they are, instead, the necessary means by which it is possible to break that “matrix of domination”<sup>40</sup> which makes the condition of women of color in the women’s movement, women in different social movements, and lesbians of color invisible.

Borderlands as sites of resistance are not meant to be fortresses, but rather they are places where it is possible to think about “how to act and not only react” on the two sides of the border. Consequently, the political and creative processes of resistance, imagination, and contestation of existing boundaries

34. Ellie D. Hernández, *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 180; Christina Wolbrecht et al. “What revolution? Incorporating Intersectionality in Women and Politics,” in *Political Women and American Democracy*, ed. Karen Beckwith and Lisa Baldez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 75.

35. Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 52-3.

36. Aída Hurtado, “*Sitios y Lenguas: Chicanas Theorize Feminisms*,” *Hypatia*, 2 (1998): 148.

37. AnaLouise Keating and Gloria Anzaldúa, “Writing, Politics, and las Lesberadas. Practicando con Gloria Anzaldúa,” *Frontiers. A Journal of Women’s Studies*, 14 (1993): 110-11.

38. Sonia Saldívar-Hull, *Feminism on the Border. Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 59.

39. Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 29.

40. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, Routledge, 2000), 18.

and power move together with the movement of border-crossing subjects. Being in a *nepantla* state allows one to recast the relationship between the center and the margins, and to reverse it completely by making the border—the most marginal place—the center of political action. This position permits a return to forgotten histories and a questioning of dominant narratives of oppression. In other words, it allows women of color to undertake a subversive process that is inherent in claiming back their origins, their differences and their history. It allows them to qualify their position and subjectivity as political, to become visible within different movements by claiming a specific position and difference, and to question the modern political canon, which has sought to push women *out of history* by identifying them as natural and apolitical subjects.<sup>41</sup>

While discussing the critical dimension of borders, Anzaldúa articulates a “politics *from* the interstices,” meaning a political process which originates in the cracks (*las rajaduras*) between different worlds and which aims to move beyond the borderlands. Talking about a politics *from* the interstices stresses the differences and similarities between the practices of interstitial politics,<sup>42</sup> Foucault’s theory of power,<sup>43</sup> and Anzaldúa’s theorization of interlocking systems of power. Understanding Anzaldúa’s borderlands as the *lieu*, or place from which liberation can be sought challenges the idea of activism *in* the cracks. Therefore, it is not the creation of a separate space in wider social movements nor is it the creation of a “safe space” located outside the operational mode of interlocking power systems, as the comparison with Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory, proposed by Koegeler-Abdi, might suggest.<sup>44</sup>

This paper proposes looking at coalitions from within a framework of what the Author refers to as a “politics of mobility *from* the interstices” since this definition furthers a new understanding of coalitions as the basis for not only an oppositional but rather a propositional and political project. This definition is useful in understanding Anzaldúa’s rejection of exclusive identity politics, such as the politics of group unity which homogenizes and eliminates differences,<sup>45</sup> without losing the polemical standpoint of claiming a specific difference or rejecting the possibility of creating alliances in a non-homogenous group of women of color.<sup>46</sup> Looking into interstices produces the premises for coalition-making from the borderlands. The borderlands are interstices and the “point of contact *y el lugar* between worlds”<sup>47</sup> where stability of the subject is *temporarily* located in the relational encounter between women of color and white women. In this sense, women of color are called to develop a politics that goes beyond the marginal spaces in which specific positionalities emerge, a politics aimed at developing a wider alliance that is not defined by monolithic and mono-dimensional allegiance, but instead it is framed on a relational understanding of continuously shifting and temporary positions. Defining political perspectives *from* the interstices calls for a collective process of emancipation from other marginal subjects, which remains a constant and often conflictual process of renegotiation.<sup>48</sup>

In addressing “the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females,”<sup>49</sup> border-dwellers’ bodies become a “bocacalle.”<sup>50</sup> According to Anzaldúa, to be a *bocacalle*, a crossroad, is the only way to survive in the borderlands. Borders must be taken down to survive, since only by

41. Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 52-52; Paola Rudan, *Donna. Storia e critica di un concetto polemico*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020), 11-22.

42. Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism. Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movement in America's Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 12; Kymberly Springer, “The Interstitial Politics of Black Feminist Organizations,” *Meridians*, 2 (2001): 155-191.

43. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire,” in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, (Paris : P.U.F., coll. Épiméthée, 1971), 154.

44. Martina Koegeler-Abdi, “Shifting Subjectivities. Mestizas, Nepantleras, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s Legacy,” *Melus*, 38 (2013): 79.

45. Keating and Anzaldúa, “Writing, Politics, and las Lesberadas,” 110-111.

46. Gloria Anzaldúa, “Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar, or Island,” 144.

47. Gloria Anzaldúa, “Gestures of the Body—Escribiendo para Idear,” in Keating, *Light in the Dark*, 2.

48. Gloria Anzaldúa, “The New Mestiza Nation. A Multicultural Movement,” in *The Gloria Anzaldúa reader*, ed. Keating, 209.

49. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 80.

50. *Ibid.*, 80.

living “*sin fronteras*”<sup>51</sup> it is possible to escape the risk of isolation. Breaking boundaries and borders, then, becomes an *act* that is imaginable only from the borderlands. Then, it is political imagination in recognizing commonalities among differences, without essentializing or homogenizing a specific condition, which is the necessary element for making coalitions and challenging systemic oppression. Almost as if referring to Audre Lorde’s caution regarding the *master’s tools*,<sup>52</sup> Anzaldúa seeks new solutions for moving from reaction to action, that is, for creating an autonomous collective subject defined by a political standpoint. Anzaldúa’s call for “new *teorías*”<sup>53</sup> is appropriate within this ambition. Moreover, according to Anzaldúa, the struggle for liberation is the ground on which coalition can be built because neither culture nor shared oppression will work. Borders can be sites for liberation where it is possible to articulate a *partial* and political struggle that does not replay hierarchical oppression and that creates “interconnected webs (*telarañas*).”<sup>54</sup>

The images of *telarañas* (literally spider webs) and *bocacalle* are analogies of the practice of political action from the borderlands as an ongoing process of breaking dichotomies. In fact, it is through the creation of an in-between space that Anzaldúa develops the concept of *nos/otras* and breaks down the canonical division between the conceptual pairs of “self/other” and “us/them.” Hence, she imagines and creates “communities of resistance” based on, as recognized by Chandra Mohanty, a “political rather than biological or cultural base for alliance.”<sup>55</sup> Breaking the us/them split is necessary for developing a politics of coalition in which diversity and difference are discussed in terms of their political dimensions and not according to that of identity. Anzaldúa sees this process taking place through the act of bridging. To become “a bridge,” women of color need to mediate between different positions, creating “a new kind of community based on the strength of diversities.”<sup>56</sup> Women of color’s commonality of experience, living in the borderlands and in the margins, along with the shared struggle toward liberation, become the base for resistance and revolution as Anzaldúa claims that “in our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures.”<sup>57</sup> Borderlands are the places where women of color can form revolutionary coalitions by starting from a historicized, common context of struggle.<sup>58</sup> It is the position of the political subject in the borderlands, as well as the dangers of a continuous crisis, which allows Anzaldúa to reject an essentialist notion of “us” without losing the radicality of the experience of women of color. Eager to put forward a strong understanding of Anzaldúa as a transnational thinker, Brenda Watts states that Anzaldúa’s coalition building is thought of as being “regardless of class or national origin.”<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, the openness towards coalitions that comes from Anzaldúa’s thought should not be considered unoriented or aimed at creating undifferentiated coalitions with other groups. While Watts rightly asserts the transnational dimension of Anzaldúa’s thought, she fails to center class as a crucial element in Anzaldúa’s social and theoretical framework for coalition building. In line with other *Chicanx* theorists and activists, starting from her working-class background and personal experiences as a *fronteriza* worker, Anzaldúa’s understanding of coalition-building is deeply rooted in the recognition of the effects of the systemic interaction of race, sex, and class.

Yet, the reference to women of color does not put forward an essentializing and homogenizing perspective in that women of color and ‘undocumented’ migrant women are presented as subjective positions from which it is possible to understand the above mentioned interlocking of different op-

51. Ibid., 195.

52. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” reprinted in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Anzaldúa and Moraga, 98-101.

53. Gloria Anzaldúa, “Introduction. Haciendo Caras, una Entrada,” in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras. Creative and critical perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), xxv-xxvi.

54. Anzaldúa, “Geographies of Selves – Reimagining Identity,” in *Light in the Dark*, ed. Keating, 75.

55. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Cartographies of Struggle. Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 4-5.

56. Yarbrow-Bejarano, “Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*,” 10.

57. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 81.

58. Mohanty, “Cartographies of Struggle,” 7.

59. Brenda Watts, “Aztlán as a Palimpsest: From Chicano Nationalism Toward Transnational Feminism in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*,” *Latino Studies* 2 (2004): 315.



pressions. In other words, Anzaldúa's coalition-making process does not erase the presence of differences, and yet it maintains the polemic standpoint of a female subject. In a practice of refusing both assimilation and an isolated (un)safe third space, bridging reflects the politics of mobility enacted by border subjects and its polemic stance. "Women of color," then, becomes a term defining a strategic position for pursuing change or, as Yarbrow-Bejarano maintains, a "conscious strategy"<sup>60</sup> for alliance.

#### 4 Anzaldúa's Political Thought and Multiracial Feminism

The metaphors of borders and bridges question the boundaries for the categories of knowledge and belonging, as well as those of the very same concept of identity. In highlighting the constant dialectic between equality and difference, inherent in the crossing between different sides as an act which enables resistance, Anzaldúa challenges the situations she experienced in the women's and Chicano movements. Starting from her critique of the exclusion of women and lesbians of color, who "speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane"<sup>61</sup> in the (white) feminist movement, she rejects the role of women of color as tokens or "purveyors of resource lists."<sup>62</sup> By placing women of color as the primary political subject, she escapes the risk of erasing difference in the name of a "global" sisterhood<sup>63</sup> and criticizes static definitions of identity<sup>64</sup> as developed in exclusionary and monolithic identity politics.<sup>65</sup> The idea of "bridging" was not a novelty in the 1980s. Not only was the previously mentioned anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, widely read, other publications were also building on the idea of bridging individuals in identity groups. For instance, the journal edited by Adrienne Rich, of which Anzaldúa was part of the editorial board, was called *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and our Friends*. Yet, when discussed within the tension between her theory of *mestiza* consciousness, as in breaking boundaries and categories, and the formation of political and collective subjects, Anzaldúa's theory challenges a strategy of bridging based on shared identities. Her conceptualization of bridging and her effort to "question term *white* and *women of color*"<sup>66</sup> are useful for discussing the development of *multiracial feminism*<sup>67</sup> in the 1990s and later.

Multiracial feminism is an important framework within which we can understand Anzaldúa's influence in shaping coalitions. The political stance of multiracial feminism originates with a radical critique of both identity politics and the white feminist movement. Indeed, the first articulation of multiracial feminism focuses on the need to recast race as a structural power system at the center of feminist activism in order to overcome a political discourse framed within a "color-evasive language."<sup>68</sup> By theorizing social positions as framed by a "matrix of domination"<sup>69</sup> and emphasizing "the intersectional nature of hierarchies at all levels of social life,"<sup>70</sup> the theoretical stand of multiracial

60. Yarbrow-Bejarano, "Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*," 11.

61. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Anzaldúa and Moraga, 165.

62. *Ibid.*, 168.

63. Raffaella Baritono, "An Ideology of Sisterhood? American Women's Movements Between Nationalism and Transnationalism," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 2 (2008): 197.

64. AnaLouise Keating, "(De)Centering the Margins? Identity Politics and Tactical (Re)Naming," in *Other Sisterhoods. Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*, ed. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 24.

65. Keating and Anzaldúa, "Writing, Politics, and las Lesberadas," 110-11.

66. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Preface. (Un)natural Bridges, (Un)safe Spaces," in *This Bridge We Call Home. Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

67. Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," in *No Permanent Waves. Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 39-60; Becky Thompson, "Time Traveling and Border Crossing. Reflections on White Identity," in *Names We Call Home. Autobiography on Racial Identity*, ed. Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi (New York: Routledge, 1996), 93-109.

68. Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, 2 (1996): 324.

69. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 18.

70. Zinn and Dill, "Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism," 327.

feminism sits between theories based on a standpoint approach and intersectionality. As multiracial feminism recognizes how the interaction of forms of domination does not only define oppressions but also opportunities, it also regards the position of groups and individuals at the top of the intersection of social hierarchies. In asserting the effects of race, sex, and class on also white women and men, multiracial feminism encompasses Anzaldúa's proposal of breaking down divisions between groups and triggers new possibilities for coalition-making. Thus, it acknowledges that "the liberation of women is the private, individual, and collective responsibility of colored and white men and women. *Aliadas por pactos de alianzas*, united by pacts of alliances, we may make some changes—in ourselves and in our societies."<sup>71</sup>

While addressing standpoint and intersectional approaches, multiracial feminist theory grants the possibility to consider the mobility of political subjects and provides a flexible theoretical structure for organizing collective activism. Describing power and hierarchies as mobile and recognizing the shifting of positions allows the investigation of the tension between standpoint and intersectionality. This means that it is not enough to claim to be a working-class Black woman in order to define one's position within a system of domination and oppression that needs to be constantly specified, historicized, and defined in a relational way, thus constantly negotiated as a privileged epistemic position. Since the conceptual framework of multiracial feminism recognizes the centrality of race, as opposed to cultural pluralism in a historical moment in which plurality had become the *otherness* of white, it contests the intersectional claim that systems of oppression operate with the same intensity. In connection with Anzaldúa's figure of shifting and the recognition of a differential operational mode of power, these elements allow multiracial feminist groups to take into consideration different positions within a local and global framework. By doing so, multiracial feminism challenges the static dimension of intersectionality which emerges in Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition,<sup>72</sup> and pursues a conceptual recognition of the mutable and relational dimension of social and political positioning, thus enabling consideration of a wider range of possibilities for collective action.

The historian Becky Thompson, who has challenged simple narratives about the feminist movement in the 1970s as either a white women's movement or as a sum of separate movements<sup>73</sup> in her work, locates Anzaldúa's work among the "theoretical guideposts"<sup>74</sup> of multiracial feminism. To claim the influence of Anzaldúa's work in multiracial coalitions, however, does mean denying the creation of separate spaces for different groups, the difficulties in articulating coalitions among women of color and with white women, or the possibility of different strategies of coalition. Multiracial feminists, then, enacted on the difficult task, outlined by Anzaldúa and Angela Davis,<sup>75</sup> of shaping coalitions based on the "recognition of commonality within the context of difference."<sup>76</sup>

Drawing primarily from the interviews of feminist activists collected in the *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project* (Smith College) and *Global Feminisms—Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship* project (University of Michigan), a few examples are now proposed which suggest how Anzaldúa's work has influenced several grassroots groups and activists in shaping multiracial coalitions and in political organizing among women of color and with white women. The interview of Graciela Sánchez, a *Chicana* activist and the founder of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, shows the shared conviction among activists and the need to move beyond identity politics, which is perceived as a limit and a compartmentalized division among groups.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, she refers to herself a

71. Anzaldúa, "Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar, or Island," 154-55.

72. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 6 (1991): 1241-99.

73. Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*.

74. Thompson, *Multiracial Feminism*, 40.

75. Angela Y. Davis and Elizabeth Martínez, "Coalition Building Among People of Color. A Discussion with Angela Y. Davis and Elizabeth Martínez," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Angela Y. Davis and Joy James (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 298.

76. Anzaldúa, "Preface," in Anzaldúa and Keating, *This Bridge We Call Home*, 2.

77. Graciela Sanchez, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, February 22-23, 2005, *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project*, Sophia Smith Collection, 95.

“bridge”<sup>78</sup> and describes the work done in Esperanza as an attempt to bridge between different communities and generations. The political activism of the collective, *INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence*, was committed to breaking racial and ethnic boundaries in order to organize politically as women of color<sup>79</sup> around the issues of violence, immigrant rights and reproductive rights, moving in a similar direction. An even more explicit example of the connection between Anzaldúa’s thought and multiracial activism lies in the work carried out by Loretta Ross, a well-known black woman and a reproductive justice activist, who was the former Director of Women of Color Program of the National Organization of Women (NOW), and also by the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective.<sup>80</sup> In her interviews,<sup>81</sup> the reference to bridging, coalition-making and Anzaldúa’s work is evident:

When you’re a bridge and you’re trying to bridge diverse worlds, then people are going to walk across your back, going in both directions, and they may not even notice that they’re crossing a bridge. [...] I actually like that position because I like being in that bridging place where you get to see both worlds and see what common ground and what unifies us versus divides. And so that’s a very good position to be in. [...] And that’s part of it, the positioning.”<sup>82</sup>

These examples show the growing effort of women of color groups to engage further across racial boundaries and with white women and reveal the different strategies and routes taken by multiracial feminist groups. They also reveal how an approach to coalition that is rooted in the framework of multiracial feminism and in Anzaldúa’s theory of bridging has proven useful in addressing the tension between commonality and difference in political coalitions composed of women of color and white women.

## 5 Searching for Connections: Anzaldúa, hooks, and Border-Crossers

Anzaldúa’s vision of borders and borderlands proposed an alternative to her present reality and laid the groundwork for a renewed centrality of women of color, although sometimes in contradictory ways. To Anzaldúa, contesting the boundaries of identity and paradigms meant engaging in a fruitful discussion of reality and political action. By reversing the locus of subjectivity, Anzaldúa attempted to formulate new theories for understanding both identity-making and coalition-making processes. In one of her posthumous publications, she writes: “The border is the locus of resistance, of rupture, and of putting together fragments.”<sup>83</sup>

Then Anzaldúa’s border recalls bell hooks’ notion of the margins as “the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.”<sup>84</sup> Like the margins, the border is a site of deconstruction and reconstruction, a site of future possibilities for liberation created by putting together fragments, identities, communities, and struggles. As Mara Montanaro has written recently, both borderlands and margins can be crossed.<sup>85</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa’s theoretical contribution is extremely innovative as she pursues the cri-

78. Ibid., 97-8.

79. Elisabeth Martínez, “Unite and Rebel! Challenges and Strategies in Building Alliances,” in *Color of violence. INCITE! Anthology*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 191.

80. Zakiya Luna, “‘Truly a Women of Color Organization’: Negotiating Sameness and Difference in Pursuit of Wquality,” *Gender & Society*, 30, 5 (2016): 769-90.

81. Transcript of the interview of Loretta Ross – Global feminisms. Comparative case studies of women’s activism and scholarship, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, May 22, 2006, 29; Loretta Ross, interview by Joyce Follet, transcript of video recording, November 3, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith, Collection.

82. Loretta Ross, interview by Joyce Follet, transcript of video recording, November 3, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith, Collection, 345.

83. Anzaldúa, “Border Arte,” in Keating, *Light in the Dark*, 47.

84. bell hooks, “Marginality as a Site of Resistance,” in *Out There. Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russel Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990), 341.

85. Mara Montanaro, “La frontière comme forme de résistance chez Gloria Anzaldúa,” *Chimères*, 96 (2020): 103.

tique of dichotomous boundaries to the extreme, coming to theorize the impossibility of recomposing the fragmentation of identity in favor of a restless state of mobility and connection. By visualizing crisis as a constant condition, she challenged the dominant discourse on immigration by unveiling the enduring political centrality of borders in the contemporary globalizing context,<sup>86</sup> and reshaped the crisis as a creative condition for generating the possibility of resistance. Thus, she proposed a multiple, unstable definition of identity and a process of resistance shaped by the interstices, as the elements pushing toward coalition, hence, what this paper refers to as a politics of mobility *from* the interstices. In this way, she proposed a *teorías* for encouraging the growing activism of women of color in the United States, which is valuable in shaping incisive alliances based on common struggles and for furthering feminist reflection on political action and initiative. Anzaldúa's work should be understood as a work in transition, incorporating the evolving theories and practices of women of color and the women's movement. Often cryptic, sometimes contradictory, her thought intertwines with other theories, such as standpoint and intersectionality theories, and dwells in the tension between difference and commonality.

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86. Nancy Naples, "Changing the Terms. Community Activism, Globalization, and the Dilemmas of Transnational Feminist Praxis," in *Women's Activism and Globalization*, ed. Naples and Desai, 9; Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method. Or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), vi-xi.