18 A Personal Reflection on Chican@ Language and Identity in the US-Mexico Borderlands: The English Language Hydra as Past and Present Imperialism

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For a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language?
(Gloria Anzaldúa, 1999)

My Dilemma

As a subject of the US-Mexico borderlands, I yearn for the knowledge and practice of a language that has been denied me. My parents suffered and endured physical pain and punishment because they spoke Spanish. They did not want that life for me. Like Gloria Anzaldúa, I view language as a specific aspect of my identity, and Chican@[1] English as the tongue of the Arizona borderlands in which I've grown up (Anzaldúa, 1999: 77). However, I continue to ask, 'Who am I with regard to language? How does my relationship with Spanish *and* English – two tongues of the coloniser – affect affirmation of my existence in education, in American society, in life?' (79).

In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was signed, concluding the Mexican–American War. This treaty ended the North American invasion of Mexico and forcibly annexed one-half of Mexican territory to the United States. Ever heard the saying, 'the border crossed us'? The border crossed my family. This treaty claimed to guarantee the linguistic, cultural and educational rights of Mexican people who, like my maternal great-great-grandmother, found themselves in conquered territory (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999: 418). Spanish would be retained as a primary language of my now

Mexican-American ancestors, even after US colonisation. However, we know from evidence (the best/worst example is what the United States has done to Native Americans) that complete colonisation goes much further than just conquering a people through force of arms. Imperialism and domination are most effective when the mind is conquered, when a people's worldview and way of life are crushed and essentially obliterated. This domination, as many Mexican Americans and other Chican@s[2] of my parents' generation can affirm, was enforced through their formal primary and secondary educations here in the US Southwest. My mother recalls the 'standard rule' of not being allowed to speak Spanish at school and being punished (e.g. being put in the corner or hit with a ruler) if she was caught speaking the language. My father will not discuss this period in his life; he refuses to remember. When faced with the decision of how to raise their children, the next generation of Chican@s, they subconsciously[3] decided it would be in our (my brother's and my) best interests to learn English only. It was at this point for me, through no decision of my own, that American colonisation took root: the domination of my mind.

Fortunately, I did get some Spanish out of my parents through the Chican@ English/Spanish spoken at home ('*Mija dame* a *huevo* from the fridge'), but language purists in both American and Mexican contexts would deem it a bastard language, not really English or Spanish (Anzaldúa, 1999: 80). I thought I knew how to speak a solid and passable version of English, but I did not realise at the time that I was learning what would be my primary language from parents who are second-language English speakers. On the other hand, my Spanish was bad, broken and wrong. I was surrounded by grandparents and other family members who spoke perfect Spanish (one grandparent spoke Spanish only), and my parents, when they chose, could speak what I perceived was perfect Spanish as well. However, I could never catch a solid grasp of Spanish, as if it were evading me, wisp-like. So family members would instead speak to me in Spanish, and I would answer in English, and we understood each other.

In the second grade I was placed in a bilingual education class to 'encourage me' and 'set an example' for the Spanish-speaking students. I guess my placement in this class meant that I was brown but spoke, by comparison, relatively good English and very bad Spanish. I was a good example of what assimilation can be. I remember being scolded on the city bus by an elderly Mexican woman who wanted me to speak to her in Spanish. 'What's wrong with you?' she asked (in Spanish). 'Didn't your parents teach you Spanish?' I tried to explain that I understood, but I just couldn't speak, but she was done with me, as she saw the kind of Mexican that *I* was. So I started watching *telenovelas*[4] on Spanish-language TV in the hope that my broken Spanish would mend itself. My comprehension improved, but my spoken attempts are still not good enough; I'm still not *really* Mexican. I'm more a Mexi*can't* than a Mexi*can*.

Yet my English apparently isn't good enough either. I was embarrassed and confused when an English professor said my writing suffered because of my background in ESL (English as a second language). ESL? This was why he was convinced I wrote like a B student, yet I was too ashamed to correct him. I was too embarrassed to tell him that I was never an ESL student and that I suffer identity insecurities because I never had the honour of claiming Spanish as my primary tongue. I let this professor believe that I was the Mexican that I wish I was. I couldn't let him know that I have two broken languages. I couldn't face it myself.

So now, after a life's worth of struggles with Spanish, I have to think about how this bastardised Spanish has affected the other language my parents intended me to master – English. Even though US imperialism denied me Spanish, society will never permit me to be the person who can truly claim Standard American English. I'll never be white. I am not middle-class white. I am not the standard; American standards do not apply to me.

My Mexican and American selves comprise an identity that relates directly to my language. As Anzaldúa asserts, 'if you want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language' (1999: 81). Thus, I struggle. I struggle because I am embarrassed when I go to Mexico and am accused of being a *gringa*[5] due to my funny pronunciations and my Spanish that is perceived as borderlands slang. I am ashamed when the real *gringas* here in the United States can speak 'proper' Spanish better than I can. I mourn the loss of the indigenous tongues I never knew, due to my *mestiza* ancestry that involves a Spanish coloniser of the past. I am angry when I face the reality that my English is not perfect, not the standard, not the norm. Like Anzaldúa once said, 'until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself' (1999: 81). Thus, I have turned to what I view is my only viable option: a Chican@ identity and a *mestiza* consciousness. Instead of forcing myself to choose one identity over another, and one language over another, I refuse to choose either/or and will instead seek a both/and *mestiza* approach.

Affirming Our Language

When I was in graduate school, all students were required to demonstrate language proficiency in a 'foreign' language. This requirement applies mainly to domestic US students, and proficiency must be established in a language secondary to English. One assumption behind this requirement is that all domestic students possess Standard American English as their primary tongue. While this assumption may be accurate for the many white students[6] traditionally in post-baccalaureate programmes, the Chican@ student whose primary language is Chican@ English falls under the radar. My graduate programme seemingly presumed that the same language

standards applicable to my white peers also applied to me because I speak the standard English I have learned to use in academic spaces (Anzaldúa, 1999: 78). However, because I can speak this English dialect, the assumption should not be made that this is my primary language; Chican@ English is. But because Chican@ English is not accepted in academic spaces as a 'real language', Chican@ students are viewed as not proficient in more than one language and are thus forced (through the taking of a translation test[7]) to prove their proficiency in formal, Castilian-informed Spanish, a language Chican@s have been historically denied. Predictably, Chican@ students either have difficulty with this translation test or do not pass it at all. We are then forced to take a Spanish grammar course for an entire semester, and if we are able to pass this course, then the programmatic language requirement is considered satisfied.

What graduate programmes like this remain unaware of, and unmoved by, is the anguish and embarrassment such requirements cause Chican@ students. Anzaldúa contends that as we've grown up speaking Chican@ Englishes and Spanishes, we 'have internalised the belief that we speak poor Spanish', and graduate programme language proficiency requirements only serve as an additional reminder of 'how our language has been used against us by dominant culture' (1999: 80). Instead of being viewed as individuals proficient in several languages (e.g. Chican@ English, Chican@ Spanish, standard English, working-class English), Chican@s are made to feel deficient in a language they were systemically denied and are then relegated to a course meant to remedy this ailment. We, in turn, blame ourselves and wish we had tried harder to learn proper Spanish as children, when in fact we never had any choice in the matter.

Ana Castillo claims that Chican@s, as people of colour in the United States, have been 'forced to succumb to white dominant society's rules, are educated in Western culture' and are thus made subject to this country's assimilationist English-only policies (1995: 5). American Dream ideology insists on a melting-pot model in which all peoples, no matter their countries of origin or backgrounds, are supposedly invited to join. However, as Castillo contends, this insistence on assimilation into the dominant society works mainly 'for *white people* regardless of their ethnic background' (emphasis added) (1995: 2). For Chican@s, blending into the 'infamous' melting pot has not successfully happened for a number of reasons, all of which Castillo lists.

Of all her given reasons, the one that I view as the most important is her assertion that Chican@s are not immigrants. We are neither newly arrived nor from Europe or other far-off countries. Many European immigrants had only to pay their dues and, in time, due to shifting perceptions of whiteness and other government-created racial projects (see Sacks, 1994, or Omi & Winant, 1986), were eventually admitted into the melting pot that is whiteness. On the other hand, a large percentage of Chican@s, like

me, have ancestral ties to the US Southwest and only became Americans when the border changed as a result of the Mexican–American War (Castillo, 1995: 2-3). We are thus neither wholly Mexican nor American, 'we are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness and Angloness. ... When not copping out ... we call ourselves Mexican ... and *mestiza* when affirming both our Indian and Spanish (but hardly ever Black ancestry); Chicano when referring to politically aware people born and/or raised in the US' (Anzaldúa, 1999: 85). Because we are all these things, out of necessity we have created a 'language with which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language' (1999: 77). This secret language affirms our identity as a distinct people, and this is validated when Chican@ literature and art such as la Chrisx's poem, 'La Loca de la Raza Cósmica' [The Crazy Woman/Queen of La Raza Cósmica] (1993), is taught in an academic course.

Chican@ Literature Courses and the New *Mestiza*

> Many of us – starved for affirmation about who we are ... realise from strenuous research (usually having to go beyond the university classroom and certainly beyond our local bookstore) that we have descended from people with blood ties traceable on these continents for many thousands of years, people who left phenomenal records demonstrating artistic and scientific brilliance. (Castillo, 1995: 6)

Both Castillo and Anzaldúa have felt their existence affirmed when reading novels and poetry written by Chican@s. I too have felt this affirmation, but in line with what Castillo states in this chapter, my encounters with Chican@ literature were non-existent in an academic context until my final semester as a graduate student. In the same way Spanish has been systemically denied, so has any affirmation of my existence through the institutional dismissal of my people's writings. Anzaldúa recalls: 'When I started teaching High School English to Chicano students, I tried to supplement the required texts with works by Chicanos, only to be reprimanded and forbidden to do so by the principal' (1999: 82). Similarly, teachers at schools in my hometown of Tucson, AZ, have been banned by the state legislature from teaching any curriculum involving the histories and literatures of Mexican–American people because of its perceived threat to US white supremacist ideology. On 11 May 2010, Arizona governor Jan Brewer signed House bill 2281 into law; the brainchild of then State Superintendent of Public Instruction (now State Attorney General) Tom Horne. It bans the following from Arizona K-12 public education:

- Promotion to overthrow the US government
- Promotion of resentment towards a race or class of people
- Courses designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group (with the exception of courses for Native American students, or the instruction of the Holocaust or any other instance of genocide, or the historical oppression of a particular group of people based on ethnicity, race or class)
- Advocating ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals

(Carcamo, 2013; Martinez, 2013)

Effective 8 March 2013, House bill 2281 was upheld by US Circuit Court Judge Wallace Tashima, so the ban on Mexican-American studies remains (Carcamo, 2013). The few ethnic studies courses not affected by this ban still face difficulties persuading the school district to approve African-American, Native-American and Asian-American courses. Although teachers have clearance to teach ethnic history and literature courses, the district designates only elective credit for these courses, when counting towards students' high-school graduation requirements. If students are to satisfy the required (for college admission) four years of English and history credits, then they must take alternate classes in which *real* '"American" and English literature' and history are taught (Anzaldúa, 1999: 82).

I attended the same high school that came under fire during this ethnic studies ban. This school is on the southwest side of Tucson, and upon graduation, my class of 250 consisted of 95% students of colour, split more or less between Chican@ and African American students. Of the 250, only 11 of us would go on to attend a four-year university because only 11 of us were granted access to the idea that a college education was an option for us. At my high school, only students in the Honors and Advanced Placement cohort were allowed to meet with the local university's minority-student recruitment representative, so the 11 students with whom I began and finished my high-school career were the only students in my grade who were ever told by the institution, 'Hey, you should go to college.' Because I was in this college-bound cohort, the only curriculum we were made to believe as valid was the 'real American and English' literature, histories and ways of knowing taught in Honors and Advanced Placement courses. As Castillo notes, 'white society insists that only European history and Greco-Roman civilisation have intellectual importance and relevance to our society. ... The ignorance of white dominant society about our ways, struggles in society, history, and culture is not an innocent and passive ignorance, it is a systemic and determined ignorance' (1995: 5). Thus, I am not surprised that I managed to get through nearly 20 years of a US education without ever being taught a Chican@ novel or poem; it is this 'determined ignorance' that make ethnic studies courses all the more crucial.

Reflecting on my experience in my first-ever Mexican-American literature course, I realise that because of my Chican@ identity (in terms of language, culture and history), I occupied a liminal space between white students and the professor. On most days I felt like a witness: an outsider looking in on how the novels, short stories and poems made radiant the few Chican@ students in the course. The course materials gave Chican@ students an agency over course content and knowledge that, in all the years I attended school, I seldom experienced. This experience demonstrated to me that 'although dominant society has rendered us powerless and silent, it does not naturally equate that we are indeed powerless (inconsequential) and silent (stupid)' (Castillo, 1995: 17). In particular, poems, such as la Chrisx's 'La Loca de la Raza Cósmica' (1993), illustrate very well the power and *voice* that Chican@s can express through the sonic use of the Chican@ English and Spanish that many of us know so well, and this power of voice and language was most obvious and powerful when we (as a class) read the poem aloud.

Many characterise 'La Loca de la Raza Cósmica' as a feminist response to Corky Gonzales' 'I Am Joaquin'.[8] While I agree with the feminist reading, I contend that this poem also serves as an illustration of a *mestiza* consciousness. Chican@ language and identity are represented through la Chrisx's use of a code-meshed voice (Young & Martinez, 2011): 'Soy "tank you" en vez de thank you/ soy "chooz" en vez de shoes' and her embracing of all the contradictory aspects of Chican@ identification: 'soy dumping my old man, even though I'm/ pregnant with his child' (lines 61-62 and 42-43). As Anzaldúa asserts, the *mestiza* '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' (1999: 101). Anzaldúa's notion of the *mestiza* is represented through la Chrisx's likening her people to *'capirotada'* (line 6), a dish made essentially of a little bit of everything, both good and bad, and even old leftover ingredients whose tastes may contradict one another. The ambivalence Anzaldúa refers to can also apply to *capirotada* because one can have both positive and negative feelings towards the dish. Sweet foods and salty foods may be separately appetising but put together may result in an inedible concoction. However, with a *mestiza* consciousness we embrace the contradictions and turn ambivalence into a strategy that assists us in coming to terms with our split-selves. Instead of having to choose one identity over another or one language over another, *mestizo@s* embrace all aspects of our identities and create a new tongue out of multiple and separate languages.

The language/identity dilemma detailed above can only be resolved by sustaining the contradictions and channeling the ambivalence into strategies. As a Chican@, I have received mixed messages all my life: 'Don't learn Spanish, but hey, why don't you know Spanish?,' 'Get an

education, assimilate, but you'll never *really* be one of *us*,' 'Do us proud *mija*, but don't start thinking you're better than us.' These contradictions are enough to drive any person insane, but when viewed through the lens of Chican@ literature in a course that actually honours these writings, the *mestiz@* can (re)imagine her/himself in relation to language and identity, just like la Chrisx's poem establishes Chican@ English as a real language with rules which those outside Chican@ culture do not know. Although theoretical texts can discuss the existence of Chican@ English, this language, as represented through Chican@ literature and art, is brought to life and has the potential to affirm Chican@ language and identity. However, beyond this self-affirmation is the more revolutionary task of convincing programmes within institutions, and institutions within systems of ideology, that Chican@ English is a real language that should be acknowledged and honoured. In this sustained era of standardised English-language imperialism, though, this is admittedly and, alas, no easy task.

Notes

(1) @: Sandra K. Soto states that her use of the '@' ending in Chican@ 'signals a conscientious departure from the certainty, mastery, and wholeness, while still announcing a politicised collectivity' (2010: 2). This '@' keystroke serves as an expression of the author's 'certain fatigue with the clunky post-1980s gender inclusive formulations' of the word and announces a 'politicised identity embraced by a man or woman of Mexican descent who lives in the United States and who wants to forge connection to a collective identity politics' (2010: 2). It also serves to unsettle not only the gender binary but also the categories that constitute it.

(2) Chican@ is used in my work synonymously with Mexican-American. I use terms such as these in my work to refer to women and men of Mexican descent or heritage who live in the United States. According to Yosso (2006), 'Chican@ is a political term, referring to a people whose indigenous roots to North America and Mexico date back centuries' (2006: 16). Also see Acuña (2010) for more on the history and origins of this term.

(3) I have discussed with my parents their decision to primarily speak English in our household, and they deny making a planned, conscious decision not to teach their children Spanish. However, I gather from what they have shared about their schooling experiences and the educational plans they had for my brother and me that English was viewed as the language with which we would have the least trouble navigating through society.

(4) Spanish-language soap operas.

(5) A white American.

(6) I acknowledge that proficiency in Standard American English depends on both race and socio-economic status. I acknowledge also that some argue 'Standard *Academic* English' is a foreign language to all; that *all* people in the process of becoming educated must learn. However, I maintain that acquisition of academic English is a raced and classed experience that favors white middle-classed backgrounds over others.

(7) This test involved translating one written paragraph of English into a paragraph of written Spanish. This practice thus privileges written literacies of Spanish over sonic literacies.

(8) See http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/latinos/joaquin.htm.

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