
*Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that
undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in
and out.*

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As self-identified¹ lesbians of color, Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde negotiate diverse, sometimes conflicting, sets of personal, political, and professional worlds. Allen, who refers to herself as a “multi-cultural event . . . raised in a Chicano village in New Mexico by a half-breed mother and a Lebanese-American father” (“Review,” 127), is a well-known Native American scholar and poet, as well as a professor of English at UCLA; Anzaldúa, the daughter of sixth-generation *mexicanos* from the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas and a self-described “Chicana *tejana* feminist-dyke-patlache poet, fiction writer, and cultural theorist,”² has been a visiting professor at several universities and a doctoral student at the University of California, Santa Cruz; and Lorde, the daughter of working-class West Indian immigrants and a self-identified “Black woman warrior poet” was born and raised in New York City where she worked for over fifteen years as professor of English at Hunter College before ‘returning’ to the Caribbean where she spent the last years of her life. All three writers participate in a number of apparently separate worlds yet refuse to be contained within any single group or location. Instead, they move within, between, and among the specialized worlds of aca-

demia and publishing; the private spaces of family and friends; the politicized communities of Native Americans, Chicanas/Chicanos, and African Americans; and the overlapping yet distinct worlds of feminist, lesbian and gay, and U.S. women of color. To borrow Victor Turner's phrase, they are "threshold people" who "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural spaces" (95).

I find this metaphor of threshold identities extremely suggestive, for it illustrates the potentially transformational implications of their work. Like thresholds—which mark transitional, in-between spaces where new beginnings and unexpected combinations can occur—Allen, Anzaldúa, and Lorde use their movements "betwixt and between" worlds to establish new connections among apparently different peoples.³ Neither entirely inside nor fully outside any single community, they adopt ambivalent insider/outsider positions in relation to a variety of cultural, professional, gender, and sexual groups. The specific worlds each writer slips through and the revisionary tactics she deploys often reflect the specific details of her regional, ethnic, and economic background—as well as other differences like native language, religion, age, education, and skin color. Yet Allen, Anzaldúa, and Lorde mobilize their threshold positions in similar ways. They engage in to-and-fro movements between multiple worlds, thus illuminating the limitations in all pre-existing identities.

But threshold positions can be dangerous, uncomfortable locations—for both readers and writers. Thresholds mark crisis points, spaces where conflicting values, ideas, and beliefs converge, unsettling fixed categories of meaning. By locating themselves at the intersections of seemingly separate groups, Anzaldúa, Allen, and Lorde challenge people who view themselves as insiders—as permanent members of a single, unitary group—to reexamine the exclusionary terms used to define their own personal and social locations. But these challenges are rarely welcomed, and threshold people open themselves to multiple risks, including self-division, isolation, misunderstanding, rejection, and accusations of disloyalty. Take, for example, Anzaldúa's self-positioning in "La Prieta," an early autobiographical essay. She acknowledges the numerous forms of alienation she has experienced in her interactions with Mexican Americans, other people of color,

feminists, lesbians, and gay men, yet refuses to sever her ties with these various groups. Instead, she locates herself on the thresholds:

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. Then there's my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there's my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. 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. (205; her emphasis)

Significantly, Anzaldúa's threshold location includes ethnic- and gender-specific worlds she could be said to have entered by virtue of appearance and birth, as well as other worlds she has more consciously chosen to enter. Although each group makes full membership contingent on its own exclusionary sets of rules and demands based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ideology, or beliefs, Anzaldúa refuses these terms without disassociating herself from the various groups. By rejecting the need for unitary identities and exclusive, single-issue alliances, she challenges her readers—no matter how they identify—to reexamine and expand their own personal and social locations. Only then can they begin forming new threshold communities, or what she terms "*El Mundo Zurdo*, the left-handed world," where people marked as different work together to bring about individual and collective change:

We are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit, *we are a threat.* (209; her emphasis)

In Anzaldúa's *Mundo Zurdo*—a world entered by choice—the differences between members are transformed into new forms of commonality.

Allen and Lorde also risk numerous forms of alienation yet insist

on the importance of multiple, at times contradictory, identities and locations. In *The Sacred Hoop*, her collection of scholarly essays on Native American literary and cultural traditions, Allen creates a threshold location based on her interactions with feminist, lesbian, academic, Native, and contemporary spiritual communities. By incorporating this threshold perspective into her work, she simultaneously challenges her readers to examine the ways homophobia, sexism, and racism have misshaped their perceptions of Native American cultures and expands existing definitions of Native, lesbian, gay, and female identities. Lorde mobilizes her own set of threshold maneuvers in her semi-autobiographical novel, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, where she draws on the numerous forms of alienation she experienced as a black lesbian to complicate simplistic notions of commonality based on ethnic, gender, or sexual identities:

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. (226; her emphasis)

As this passage suggests, Lorde insists that no matter how concise the identity markers might seem, they do not automatically unite people into self-affirming communities. Like Anzaldúa and Allen, however, she uses these differences among people to generate new forms of bonding.

For Allen, Anzaldúa, and Lorde, threshold locations are performative. Rather than deny the contradictions they experience as they negotiate among numerous groups, they explore them in writing. By thus translating their lives into words, they reinvent themselves and enact new forms of identity, nondual modes of subjectivity that blur the boundaries between apparently distinct peoples. This use of the written word draws on language's performative effects and deconstructs conventional western dualisms. Like other poststructuralist thinkers, Allen, Anzaldúa, and Lorde maintain that language does not simply reflect reality but instead reshapes it. Yet they take this belief in language's performative powers even further by associating it with precolonial nonwestern oral traditions. In so doing, they simulta-

neously spiritualize and politicize their words. More specifically, by drawing on Native American, Mexican Indian, and West African oral traditions, which posit a dialogic relationship between the human and nonhuman dimensions of life, they enact a variety of to-and-fro movements enabling them to combine cultural critique with the invention of new forms of culture. As they borrow from and rewrite precolonial belief systems, they simultaneously expose the limitations in existing definitions of ethnic, gender, and sexual identity and invent open-ended alternatives.

It is these transformational possibilities that distinguish the works of Allen, Anzaldúa, and Lorde from those of many other contemporary social actors, for in the process of reinventing themselves, they reinvent their readers. As they inscribe their threshold identities into their creative and critical writings, they challenge their readers to rethink the dominant culture's sociopolitical inscriptions—the labels that define each person according to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and other systems of difference. More specifically, they employ what I call transformational identity politics. Unlike conventional identity politics—where social actors base their political theories and strategies on their personal sense of ethnic, gender, and sexual identity—transformational identity politics deconstructs all such notions of unified, stable identities. Although I discuss these two politics of identity in greater detail in Chapter 3, I want to point out the creative possibilities opened up by the latter, more flexible form. Rather than simply enabling alliances across differences, transformational identity politics employs these differences to generate new forms of commonality. This politics of identity relies on transformational epistemologies, nondual ways of thinking that destabilize the networks of classification that restrict us to static notions of personal and collective identity. In so doing, it opens up psychic spaces where alterations in consciousness can occur.

To emphasize the liberating potential in the new ways of thinking Allen, Anzaldúa, and Lorde invent, I want briefly to summarize conventional western knowledge systems. Based on Enlightenment principles, mainstream epistemologies share a number of unquestioned presuppositions, including: 1) the existence of a single, unchanging, universal truth; 2) a distinct separation between the knowing subject

and the object under investigation that ensures the knower's unbiased access to this truth; 3) a neutral, transparent language system capable of accurately reporting these newly discovered truths; 4) objective, scientific conceptions of knowledge; and 5) the use of binary oppositions to develop intellectual structures so that reason, for example, is defined by what it excludes—it is the opposite of emotion. This dualistic framework has played a significant role in shaping contemporary western social structures, for it divides reality into a series of binary oppositions that separate subject from object, mind from body, and human beings from nature. Combined with the belief in a single, unchanging standard of truth, binary knowledge systems reinforce dominant/subordinate worldviews and restrictive forms of thinking that define difference as deviation from a single norm. Perhaps most importantly for my argument in *Women Reading Women Writing*, dualistic thinking leads to the construction of oppressive social and symbolic systems, where people marked as “different” because of appearance, lifestyle, or beliefs are viewed as inferior. They are dehumanized, objectified, and controlled by the so-called norm.

As I explain in the following chapters, by drawing on Native American, Mexican Indian, and West African worldviews, Allen, Anzaldúa, and Lorde create transformational epistemologies and embodied metaphysics that undermine these binary structures. Whether they call it “a spirit that pervades everything, that is capable of powerful song and radiant movement, and that moves in and out of the mind” (Allen), a “spirit world” (Anzaldúa), or the “divine principles” that move through our lives (Lorde), all three writers reinterpret non-western beliefs and invent nondual metaphysical systems that locate the spiritual in material and intellectual life. This revisionist approach to precolonial cultural traditions enables them to unite their critiques of existing social systems with visionary thinking: On the one hand, they critically analyze western culture's dualistic forms of thought and disrupt conventional social and symbolic structures; on the other hand, they construct transformational epistemologies that destabilize the boundaries between and within physical and nonphysical worlds, thus opening spaces where new forms of connection can occur.

This doubled gesture represents a significant theoretical shift in feminist theory, as well as a remarkable break from previous episte-