



Living with(out) borders: The intimacy of oppression

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ABSTRACT

Recounting the multiple oppressions of the queer Chicana, Anzaldúa describes this as the “intimate terror” of being caught in-between the different worlds she inhabits. In this paper I argue that the theme of intimacy is crucial for understanding the political life and its hold on the subject’s body. My discussion of intimacy and oppression begins in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy because it presents an influential and constructive way to think about intersubjective relations and the intimate way we inhabit our worlds. I am particularly interested in his description of the body as a desiring body that is without borders and encroaches on other bodies. The writings of Anzaldúa, Hooks, Fanon, and Ahmed importantly complicate the initial analysis. While understanding bodies as “living without borders” is helpful for beginning to understand the intimate structure of oppressive relations, it does not yet make sense of the very real and oppressive borders that we might encounter on a daily basis. I suggest that we understand such borders as equally intimate, that is, as enacted sedimentations of the lived body. Thus I conclude that “because we are boundless” we engage in an intimate intersubjective relationship that is “boundary creating” and thus potentially violent.

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The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the panic below the surface of the skin, daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee...Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. Alienated from her mother culture, “alien” in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits. (Anzaldúa, 2012: 42)

She drinks her coffee and trembles with fear, paralyzed by the panic that accompanies her everyday living in this world. Both shivering and petrified, in the quote above the feminist activist poet-philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa,¹ captures as no one else the unbearable experience of the terror that is oppression. Recounting the multiple intersecting oppressions of a queer Chicana, Anzaldúa describes this everyday terror in terms of being caught: she cannot move backward or forward, she is immobilized, and held in an embrace that crushes her. To this extent, her description resembles

Marilyn Frye’s well known definition of oppression because she is trapped between barriers which “restrain, restrict or prevent [her] motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce” (Frye, 1983: 2). But Anzaldúa says more than this, she recounts the isolation and the pervasiveness of a fear that does not let her enjoy her coffee in peace and she stresses the unbearable tension of being simultaneously shaken and unable to move. Both shivering and petrified, she breaks. Her body breaks, “fence rods in my flesh, /splits me splits me” (Anzaldúa, 2012: 24). In this manner, Anzaldúa draws attention to the particular affective experience of being oppressed. She indicates that oppression is close to the skin, weighs heavily on one’s flesh, and crushes the lived body from multiple sides simultaneously. This emphasis on the closeness of oppression adds one more crucial aspect to her description: *oppression is intimate*.² In this paper I argue that understanding the intimate closeness of our

² Anzaldúa’s account of oppression as an “intimate terror” that invades into the “inner life” of herself (2012: 43) has served as an inspiration for this paper. To describe oppression as intimate challenges and destabilizes the more ordinary understanding of intimate relations as loving and affectionate. I do this on purpose in order to bring out the affective dimension of oppression. This of course does not mean that we cannot still experience wonderful moments of genuine intimacy between subjects. The many other papers in this volume attest to this. I agree with one of my reviewers who writes that oppression crosses the line of intimacy into invasion and I add that unfortunately it is not always easy to separate the two. Any further analysis of work done in particular on violence in intimate relationships illustrates this sad fact (see for example the work collected in O’Toole et al., 2007).

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¹ “Shortest bio GEA: Feminist visionary spiritual activist poet-philosopher fiction writer” (Anzaldúa, 2009: 3).

intersubjective lives is crucial for understanding the political life and its hold on the subject's body. To understand oppression as an intimate experience, or as "intimate terrorism" (Anzaldúa, 2012: 42), helps understand its affective dimension, its suffocating strength and deeply hidden roots, its inhabiting and restructuring of the body, its manifestation in the patterns of the daily life and its presence in one's most familiar and personal spheres, and, most importantly its tight intersubjective constitution.

My discussion of intimacy and oppression begins in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy because it presents an influential and constructive way to think about intersubjective relations, the lived-body, and the intimate way we inhabit our worlds. For the purpose of this paper, I am particularly interested in Merleau-Ponty's *Nature* lectures and his description of the body as a desiring body that, without borders or frontiers, encroaches, 'bites,' appropriates, and occupies other bodies. In order to highlight the intimate violence of oppressive relations, I read Merleau-Ponty's work in light of the writings of Bell Hooks, Franz Fanon, Sara Ahmed, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Their accounts importantly complicate, critique, and complete the initial analysis. Most importantly their work addresses the inherent power differential of oppression and describes and analyses the very real and oppressive borders that we might encounter on a daily basis. In this paper, I suggest that we rediscover borders through understanding them as equally intimate, that is, as enacted sedimentations of the lived body. Thus I conclude that *because we are boundless* we engage in an intimate intersubjective relationship that is *boundary creating* and thus potentially violent.

Anzaldúa's work frames the paper, interrupts, and critiques it. As such the paper is a recreation of the process that shaped it. Time and again I returned to her words in order to re-listen, re-think, and re-write, to take inventory of the baggage we carry, and to participate in the difficult collusion—coalition—collision—work of making meaning across borders (Anzaldúa, 2009: 144, 1990, xviii). Anzaldúa challenges anyone to "put history through a sieve" in order to consciously "rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions" (2012: 104) and to "after reading this paper consider making some decisions and setting goals to work on yourself, with another" (2009, 155). A lot of my own work that is ongoing is such work done *after* writing and reading. This is difficult and serious work that involves amongst others facing my own whiteness, my femininity, and other privileges and obstacles I encounter in the world.³ Consequently, in addition to being part of the argument and carefully interwoven within it, Anzaldúa's words have taken a space of their own in this paper, interrupting its flow with challenges and visions.

In Collusion, in Coalition, in Collision (Anzaldúa, 2009: 144). Alliance work is the attempt to shift positions, change positions, reposition ourselves regarding our individual and collective identities (143). Alliance stirs up intimacy issues, issues of trust, relapse of trust, intensely emotional issues (146). What may be "saving" the colored and white feminist movements may be

...tension between opposing theories...combined with respect, partial understanding, love and friendship that keeps us together in the long run. So mujeres think about the carnalas you want to be in your space. Those whose spaces you want to have overlapping yours (154).⁴

1. An ontology of intimacy

The theme of intimacy is persistently present in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the subject's embodied being in the world. Merleau-Ponty speaks of our intimate close contact with the world in one of his compellingly beautiful working notes: "thus the body stands before the world and the world upright before it, and between them there is a relation that is one of *embrace*. And between these two vertical beings, *there is not a frontier, but a contact surface*" (1968, 271; my emphases). With this image Merleau-Ponty expresses that the subject's body and the world that she finds before her are intimately related to each other and interwoven with each other. Significantly, he draws our attention to two main dimensions of this intimate relationship. First, his rejection of frontiers in favor of surfaces is important because surfaces are permeable whereas frontiers call to mind borders that can only be crossed with violence. Second, the reference to 'being in contact' specifically brings to mind the sense of *touch* as it takes place at the level of the skin. My skin continually touches the world while being touched by it — by its objects, the other subjects in it, even the flow of air. This inherent openness of the skin is well expressed by Sarah Ahmed when she refers to the skin as this "border that feels," (Ahmed, 2000: 45) and when in a Merleau-Pontian fashion she describes it as the place where we make contact with the world, move it, and are moved by it. She writes that through the surface of our skin we are always already "exposed" and thus open to others (45). Thus, Merleau-Ponty's depiction of two embracing figures (subject and world), his rejection of the term "frontiers," and his emphasis on the affective experience of being in contact, sketches an initial outline of how *our being in the world is intimate*.

While continually indicating that the relationship he explores is intimate, Merleau-Ponty also uses more violent terms to describe this relationship. For example he comments elsewhere: "the thing is...what bites into me, and what I bite into through my body" (1973, 45n). There is in biting a true notion of reaching into something and thus by referring to biting Merleau-Ponty draws particular attention to the *intertwining* of the subject and the world. The biting metaphor captures that we simultaneously taste the world while we feel the 'teeth' of the world sinking into our flesh. As such it adds an almost erotic dimension to our engagement with the world. Not only do I see, hear, and feel the world, I also simultaneously taste it, incorporate it, and am incorporated by it. Thus, rather than a neutral, unaffected, and detached understanding of the world, I am always already im-plicated (folded-in) in the world. My way of comprehending and perceiving this world is always already affected by the world itself and in addition, the way I grasp the world affects what I can comprehend about it. In this manner *our engagement with the world is intimate*.

³ This paper is not the place to focus exclusively on my own feelings, to ask for validation of my victimhood, or to confess and to be pardoned of certain complicities. One cannot easily get rid of one's complicity in a system of oppression and one cannot presume that by merely stating one's complicity one would be able to regain a neutral voice (see also Anzaldúa's discussion of a white guilt that howls so loudly that it drowns out the voice of the woman of color [2009, 130]). As I discuss in this paper, our attachment to an oppressive system is deeply seated in the very structure of one's being. It is open to reformation through struggling at it (Hooks, 1984). Both my academic and my personal voice are heard throughout this paper, but this paper is not written to make me the topic of interest. Instead I want this interest to be directed to the voices of Anzaldúa, Hooks, Fanon, Ahmed and others in order to understand the intimate structure of oppression.

⁴ Throughout this paper I will let Anzaldúa's multilingual writing stand as it is. Often the Spanish sections can be interpreted in context and often she says the same thing again in English at a later time. Nevertheless these sections also add a dimension of difficulty to a reader unfamiliar with the languages she uses. Her use of Chicano Spanish expresses the particularity of her voice and has an important effect of making the text escape from one's full grasp. She writes: "until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without always having to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate" (2012: 81).

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