

GLORIA ANZALDÚA

Linguistic Terrorism



Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004) was known for her contributions to Chicana, feminist, postcolonial, and gender studies, which grew out of her sense of being “on the margins” in terms of sexuality, nationality, language, and skin color. Anzaldúa was born in the Rio Grande Valley along the Mexican border in southern Texas, where her ancestors, the descendants of early Spanish settlers in Mexico and of Native Americans, had long been ranchers. After graduating from what is now the University of Texas, Pan American, she earned a master’s from the University of Texas at Austin and taught in preschools and special education classes before moving to California. An editor of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), Anzaldúa wrote fiction and poetry as well as several books for children.

“Linguistic Terrorism” is from Anzaldúa’s semiautobiographical *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), a “mixed” form of writing that combines prose and poetry, two varieties of English, and six varieties of Spanish. Anzaldúa used this mixture deliberately to make the text frustrating for most readers to follow and thereby evoke the author’s sense of herself as an outsider with multiple identities.

Deslenguadas. Somos los del español deficiente. We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestizaje, the subject of your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically somos huérfanos—we speak an orphan tongue.

CHICANAS WHO GREW UP SPEAKING CHICANO SPANISH have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other.

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Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation. For the longest time I couldn't figure it out. Then it dawned on me. To be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we'll see there. *Pena*. Shame. Low estimation of self. In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives.

Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure. Their language was not outlawed in their countries. They had a whole lifetime of being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was a first language, taught in school, heard on radio and TV, and read in the newspaper.

If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me. Often with *mexicanas y latinas* we'll speak English as a neutral language. Even among Chicanas we tend to speak English at parties or conferences. Yet, at the same time, we're afraid the other will think we're *agringadas* because we don't speak Chicano Spanish. We oppress each other trying to out-Chicano each other, vying to be the "real" Chicanas, to speak like Chicanos. There is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience. A monolingual Chicana whose first language is English or Spanish is just as much a Chicana as one who speaks several variants of Spanish. A Chicana from Michigan or Chicago or Detroit is just as much a Chicana as one from the Southwest. Chicano Spanish is as diverse linguistically as it is regionally.

By the end of this century, Spanish speakers will comprise the biggest minority group in the United States, a country where students in high schools and colleges are encouraged to take French classes because French is considered more "cultured." But for a language to remain alive it must be used.¹ By the end of this century English, and not Spanish, will be the mother tongue of most Chicanos and Latinos.

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather

1. Irena Klepfisz, "Secular Jewish Identity: Yidishkayt in America," in *The Tribe of Dina*, Kaye/Kantrowitz and Klepfisz, eds., 43. [Author's note]

See p. 753
for tips on
introducing
CLASSIFICATION
into your text.

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speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather
than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice:
Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my
sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.

My fingers
move sly against your palm.
Like women everywhere, we speak in code. . . .

—MELANIE KAYE/KANTROWITZ² ♦

2. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, "Sign," in *We Speak in Code: Poems and Other Writings* (Pittsburgh, PA: Motherroot Publications, Inc., 1980), 85. [Author's note]

READING WITH AN EYE FOR THE METHODS

1. In "Linguistic Terrorism," Anzaldúa **CLASSIFIES** Spanish-speaking Americans into different types. Which type (or types) does she belong to? Why does it matter, according to her?
2. In addition to identifying different types of language and speakers, Anzaldúa analyzes the **CAUSES** of her own linguistic diversity. What are some of them? What specific **EFFECTS** do they have on her identity, both linguistic and personal?
3. So who are the linguistic terrorists in Anzaldúa's account? What **POSITION** does she take to oppose them? How and where does she use the different languages she speaks to support that position?