Lockhart, Tara. “Writing the Self: Gloria Anzaldúa, Textual Form and Feminist Epistemology.” *Knowledge*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Library. Fall 2006-Spring 2007. Vol.20. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.ark5583.0020.002. Web. Accessed 31 Mar 2015.

**Writing as Counter to Traditions of Silence: Mestiza Identity in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”**

Gloria Anzaldúa’s writing is well known for challenging readers to push against the limits of what they know about specific contexts and situations. Anzaldúa allows readers to experience, to some degree at least, what it is to live in the physically and linguistically “bordered” world of Texas. Anzaldúa’s fifth chapter of *Borderlands* begins with the metaphor of the narrator’s visit to the dentist, establishing the chapter’s central motif of “taming a wild tongue.” [[2]](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mfsfront/ark5583.0020.002/--writing-the-self-gloria-anzaldua-textual-form-and-feminist?c=mfs;c=mfsfront;g=mfsg;id=N2;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1) For the dentist, the narrator’s tongue is too unruly and disobedient. It keeps getting in the way and the dentist notes that “something must be done” about it (53). Reflecting on this experience, the narrator notes that for those who speak up against injustice, “Wild tongues can’t be tamed. They can only be cut out” (54). This opening metaphor sets the stage for the analyses and arguments Anzaldúa constructs regarding the importance of language, linguistic identity, and cultural identity. Although Anzaldúa often summons memories, stories, or short anecdotes like the one above in order to illustrate her points through drawing on different types of knowledges, Chapter Five is primarily characterized by its critical scrutiny of the borderlands that the narrator occupies. In this vein, the beginning anecdote about the dentist is followed by a quote from artist Ray Gwyn Smith which, centered on the page, reads, “Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?” Beginning with a personal narrative and moving to an interrogative citation, Anzaldúa creates a hybrid structure which resonates with her exploration of linguistic identity. This fast-paced textual layering continues in the next three paragraphs. In the first, the narrator relates a childhood altercation with her Anglo teacher who admonished her for speaking Spanish at recess. In the second paragraph, the narrator quotes her mother’s desire for her children to speak English without an accent, a desire which coincided with the goals of the local schooling systems. Here, we are introduced to the mixing of English and Spanish text within the dialogue spoken by the narrator’s mother: the mother’s first sentence is in English, but is followed by two sentences which are completely in Spanish except for the last word “accent” which is in scare-quotes due to its English insertion within a Spanish sentence. Finally, with the third paragraph Anzaldúa ends the chapter’s first short section declaratively with three sentences reading:

Attacks on one’s form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. *El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua.* Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out. (54 )

In addition to constructing a hybrid text that moves between different types of written expression, Anzaldúa’s piece adds a level of hybrid complexity by simultaneously moving between multiple languages in order to make a strong, polemical statement.

It is important to notice, however, that whereas in the second paragraph the Spanish was contained within the mother’s dialogue – marking it as speech and as expression closely tied to identity and thus, in some ways, both expected and innocuous – in the above quotation the Spanish text is asserted by the narrator and takes its place alongside the English text. This shift is important as it marks the shift from Spanish as tied to an individual’s way of speaking to a heightened reliance on Spanish to communicate the argument of the piece. The use of Spanish not only assists the English text in making a point, but moves beyond what English is able to express to include other dimensions and meanings more ably present in Spanish. Here, for example, the Spanish text allows the narrator to shift both the tone of the paragraph from a legal diction to a more personal tone, while at the same time more directly implicating those Anglos “with innocent faces” as those who attempt to censor language. This progression in turn sets up the paragraph for the concluding sentence which circles back to the opening metaphor of the wild tongue, here asserting that only violence can “cure” such wildness.

This hybrid style – marked by changes in types of writing and argument, as well as changes in language usage – results in a text which weaves together multiple threads in order to approach a central idea. An example of this hybridity occurs in Chapter Five’s next section, entitled “Overcoming the Tradition of Silence.” The structure of the section consists of a range of writing I will explore below: an introductory epigraph in Spanish, a longer paragraph, a shorter paragraph, a short poem written by Jewish writer Irena Klepfisz, and lastly, a very short paragraph of two sentences. Each of these sections of writing is held apart from the following section by a space break; this usage marks this section as unique from other sections in the chapter which utilize white space less consistently and more sparingly. As critics such as Julie Jung have argued, space breaks are used purposefully to resist linear transitions and thus, make readers “listen” better. [[3]](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mfsfront/ark5583.0020.002/--writing-the-self-gloria-anzaldua-textual-form-and-feminist?c=mfs;c=mfsfront;g=mfsg;id=N3;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1)

The beginning epigraph in Spanish sets the tone of the section and introduces the tropes of dark, light, and shadows as well as the feeling of being buried by silence. The use of the three line epigraph entirely in Spanish establishes an alternative to English-only usage. In addition to specifically calling on women to enact a feminist confrontation to the tradition of patriarchal silence, it also enacts a possible way to counter the “tradition” of silence through alternative and confrontational language usage. Moreover, the three line epigraph accelerates the amount of Spanish the reader encounters. The following long paragraph heightens this movement since its first sentence is also written in Spanish, however the trend of this paragraph is to introduce cultural sayings and phrases, which are then translated or contextualized by the English text within the paragraph. Here, the English text serves the purposes and meanings of the Spanish text: the two languages are integrated within sentences, the narrator moving back and forth between the two as she establishes the litany of phrases used to denigrate women and their speech.

The following short paragraph – the third piece of text among the five which constitute the section – elaborates the patriarchal nature of discourse through the narrator’s recollection of the first time she heard the feminine plural of “we,” nosotras. This paragraph concretizes the idea that women can be culturally degraded and minimized through language. Thus, the cultural experience of women is given specific weight by the narrator’s remembrance of being struck by the use of nosotras. Via a turn to personal example, the personal evidence is then further sedimented as the tone shifts to a more academic, claim-based argument: “We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse” (54 ).

Juxtaposing this more argumentative discourse is the following poem, by Jewish writer Irena Klepfisz, which also makes interesting use of white space:

And our tongues have become

dry the wilderness has dried

out our tongues and we have

forgotten speech.

Formally, the shift to poetic language and form extends the narrator’s ability to move between shifting discourses and types of writing. The use of white space within the poem accents the themes of language aridity and visually invokes the forgetting of languages. This use of white space thus also provides a formal bridge to Anzaldúa’s use of the space break. In this section as a whole, silence is invoked on the page through space break – patches of speech and ideas are simultaneously held apart for contemplation even as they are joined under the section title “Overcoming the Tradition of Silence.” In this way, each part of the section seems a step in breaking that tradition, overcoming silence via its individual speech act. Yet things are not quite so simple, as the narrator points out in the two sentence concluding paragraph of the section: “Even our own people, other Spanish speakers *nos quieren poner candados en la boca*. They would hold us back with their bag of *regles de academia*” (54). Even as the narrator seeks to build an illustrative and suggestive argument suggesting how silence might be overcome, the text seems discontent with resolving too easily or sacrificing the complexity of the dynamics surrounding language use to simplistic, or overly hopeful, lines of thought.

As I’ve shown in the analysis of this section, hybridity exists not only as the central content of the piece – the inquiry and difficulty being explored – but appropriately becomes the concomitant form of the writing. In order to discuss hybridity, it seems it is necessary to view and write the world through hybridity. And as the narrator of Anzaldúa’s piece suggests, solutions, peoples, and interpretations are multiple; no easy alliances can be found in such a population as “our own people” or “Spanish speakers.” Indeed, the rest of Chapter Five does much to articulate the stratifications within populations which have been mis-viewed as singular or unified. Among the differences Anzaldúa explores are the multiple languages Chicanos speak as well as the relationships between Spanish speakers as they negotiate which language to speak to whom; the history of Spanish linguistic change in response to other languages, populations, and geographical realities; the relationship between linguistic and ethnic identity, the pressures of acculturation, and the accompanying emotions of shame and low self-esteem; and issues of identification and hybrid mestiza consciousness. [[4]](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mfsfront/ark5583.0020.002/--writing-the-self-gloria-anzaldua-textual-form-and-feminist?c=mfs;c=mfsfront;g=mfsg;id=N4;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1) Alongside these informative and argumentative sections, Anzaldúa includes personal reflection and narration about her place within these cultural fissures and borders, including a section devoted to the visceral memories that define the narrator as Chicana and the difficulty she experienced relaying this identity to an often hostel and limiting Anglo world. Thus we see that Chapter Five works largely to enlighten the reader through an assemblage of written expression, even as it ultimately relies upon argumentative, declarative, and expository rhetoric to make its points.

A summary of the final pages of Chapter Five will illustrate the diverse and dialogic discourse strategies Anzaldúa deploys in constructing a hybrid, essayistic text which summons multiple lines of thought and expression to erect its arguments. The final section of Chapter Five – *Si la preguntas a mi mamá, "Qué eres?*” – begins with a centered epigraph: "Identity is the essential core of who we are as individuals, the conscious experience of the self inside" (62). Fittingly, this last section explores the competing ways Chicanos have tried to establish a sense of identity – national, racial, linguistic, spiritual, emotional – even as they "straddle the borderlands" both physically and in terms of how they, and others, understand identity. Using the metaphors of both eagle and serpent as a way to illustrate surpassing borders, Anzaldúa chronicles how the Chicano population identifies multiply – Mexican, *mestizo*, *Raza*, *tejano* – each inflecting or accentuating a particular aspect of identity. Such identification is necessary to combat the narrator’s feeling that “I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one” (63).

The coining of the name “Chicano” therefore served as an important catalyst for distinguishing Chicanos as “a distinct people”: “Now that we had a name, some of the fragmented pieces began to fall together – who we were, what we were, how we had evolved. We began to get glimpses of what we might eventually become” (63). Anzaldúa writes, “One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration [will] take place” (63). Accordingly, this paragraph continues in Spanish, posing questions and asserting the Chicano’s own identity struggles, thus fully integrating Spanish and English in order to imagine such integration on the page. In the conclusion to Chapter Five, Anzaldúa deploys fewer space breaks, resulting in a prose-style that builds momentum and ties together the multiple narratives, examples, and claims made. [[5]](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mfsfront/ark5583.0020.002/--writing-the-self-gloria-anzaldua-textual-form-and-feminist?c=mfs;c=mfsfront;g=mfsg;id=N5;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1) The conclusion thus establishes both a sense of unification and a sense of alterity; Chicanos are held together by their differences and this realization and recognition of difference is crucial to hybrid identity. What Anzaldúa has shown us through her text is just this: that the “fragmented pieces” of identity and subject position can begin “to fall together” into persuasive argument via a hybrid textual form which makes room for multiple ways of knowing and expressing the self.