

Mechica: Indigenous Origin of the Chicano Hybrid Identity

Rolando J. Diaz
Southeastern Oklahoma State University

Both Homi Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldúa speak of a “third” element that emerges as a “structure of ambivalence” (Bhabha 217) and as a “new consciousness” (Anzaldúa 102). Bhabha develops his concept of culture in terms of class, gender, and race, whereas Anzaldúa bases her concept of culture in terms of fluid, and transient borders. The term Mechica and the Chicano hybrid identity (historical, cultural, and linguistic) are presented here as an amalgamation of various components that when brought together result in something new, something distinct, and something altogether greater than the sum of its parts. The native roots of the Chicano can be traced back to the Aztecs and to other indigenous people in what would become Mexico. His European roots were introduced by the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492. The complexity of the Chicano is that he is both the conqueror and the conquered. He is an amalgamation of both the indigenous and the European. He speaks the language of conquest (Spanish in Mexico; English in the United States), yet holds on to remnants of Nahuatl. This paper will approach the Chicano identity as hybrid of the Indigenous/Native American and the European/Spanish patrimonies.

In his book *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha explores how cultural domination often leads to the creation of a third space, pursuant to cultural identity that is “produced on the boundaries in-between forms of difference, in the intersections and overlaps across spheres of class, gender, race, nation, generation, location” (i). Bhabha further states:

Hybridity has no such perspective of depth or truth to provide: it is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures, or the two scenes of a book, in a dialectical play of ‘recognition’. The displacement from symbol to sign creates a crisis for any concept of authority based on a system of recognition: colonial specularly, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid. (*Location* 114)

If authority is based on a system of recognition, then what are acknowledged is the self and the perception of that self, which combine to form the hybrid. Recognition of Chicano identity can be perceived as a reflection of colonial and indigenous elements, arriving at

the creation of the mestizo, who is subjected to yet one more instance of hybridity within the culture of the United States.

According to Bhabha,

Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition. Again, it must be stressed, it is not simply the content of disavowed knowledges – be they forms of cultural otherness or traditions of colonialist treachery – that return to be acknowledged as counter-authorities. (114)

In the chapter “How Newness Enters the World,” Bhabha addresses the creation of a third space: “The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable difference creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences” (*Location* 218). Indeed, the cross-cultural contact between the two nations creates a fluid situation in which the inhabitants of these border regions experience a constant back and forth from one language/identity/culture to another.

Bhabha comments on the elements that refuse to be absorbed into the cultural mainstream:

Hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements – the stubborn chunks – as the basis of cultural identifications. What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently, ‘opening out’, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race. (*Location* 219)

Homi Bhabha explores the inherent hybridity of the Chicano within the context of borderline conditions that “inhabit an intervening space” (*Location* 7), where the subject engages in invention and intervention, “which requires a sense of the new that resonates with the Chicano aesthetic of ‘rasquachismo’” as conceived by Tomas Ybarra-Frausto. The essence of this term is based on “syncretism, juxtaposition, and integration” resulting in “mixtures and confluence” (7). Bhabha refers to the art of Guillermo Gomez-Peña, a performance artist who tends to live along the U.S. and Mexico with the idea that:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past

as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (7)

The idea of "newness" can be applied to the hybridity of the Chicano/a. It is and it is not a part of the continuum from the past to the present.

One of the issues directly related to this cultural hybridity pursuant to the Chicano/a has to do with terminology. The term "Hispanic," for example, has often been used to refer to Mexican Americans. It is a term set in place as U.S. Government policy during the decade of the early nineteen sixties (Gracia *Latinos in America* 51). According to the U.S. Census, the term Hispanic is defined as "a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race" (Idler 17). Many Americans of Mexican descent who fall under this term feel that it is a government-imposed categorization that denies individuality of nationalities and cultures (Gracia *Hispanic/Latino* x). The term also focuses on the European roots of the group while ignoring the indigenous roots. Furthermore, all Hispanic cultures are not the same. Hispanics come from over twenty countries, each with its own history and way of life (Idler 41-43). Hispanic, then, is an umbrella term, preferred by some, despised by others, that covers a multitude of countries and used by the United States Government to label over fifty-five million people.

An intense cultural hybridity is what many Mexican immigrants bring with them from Mexico. They are already divided between Spanish religion and indigenous beliefs, between the Spanish language and the indigenous languages, etc. One can imagine their confusion when they to survive in the American way of life, which has historically called for an abandonment of the old ways for the assimilation of mainstream values and ideals. Upon coming to the United States, given the English-only mentality that seems to permeate the country, Spanish is replaced by English. The education policies in Texas back in the fifties, sixties, and seventies tried to wipe out the Spanish language spoken by immigrants and have them assimilate into the American way and in the process obliterate their own traditions and language (Meier 236-56).

Cultural hybridity occurs when individuals find themselves in a cultural situation at home that is different from the one they face at work or at school. Many Hispanics live in a mixed environment that is characterized by a traditionally Mexican, Spanish-speaking microcosm at home and in the neighborhood, and a primarily Anglo-Saxon macrocosm in the world of work, school and general social interaction outside of the immediate community. Some educators and service providers have called this form of hybridity "cultural schizophrenia,"¹ but in general, it is referred to here as cultural hybridity.

¹ Alicia Gaspar De Alba, "Literary Wetback," *The Massachusetts Review* 29, no. 2 (1988): 242-6; De Alba, "Crop Circles in the Cornfield: Remembering Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942-2004)," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): iv-vii; Marcial Gonzalez, "Postmodernism, Historical Materialism and Chicana/a Cultural Studies," *Science & Society* 68, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 161-186.

Americans who are descendants of Mexican immigrants, can also be referred to as Tejanos, Californios, depending on the state in which they live, Chicanos and the more generic terms of Hispanics and Latinos. Because they live between two distinct paradigms along the U.S./Mexico border, the task remains for them to try to arrive at some degree of harmony or balance in the development of a hybrid identity. There is no specific answer as to what all members of this group would prefer to be called. Although the term Hispanic is a term that can be applied to all, the very quality of the “one-size fits all” is what drives people away from this word, since it sacrifices individuality for the convenient generic label.

During the Civil Rights movements of the sixties when all these issues were being debated, the term “Chicano” started to gain currency among civil rights activists. In the book *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans*, Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera state that “The term Chicano, a form of “mexicano” truncated by dropping the first syllable, had a somewhat pejorative connotation in the first half of this [twentieth] century, but it has been taken by many young Americans of Mexican descent as a badge of pride since World War II” (xiv).

The term “Chicano” is based on the indigenous, Nahuatl word “mexica” that was incorporated into Spanish and then used as an identifier in the United States for the descendants of Mexicans starting in the late nineteen fifties and sixties. A discussion of the term “Chicano” must begin with a look at the phonetic / etymological origins of the word. In his essay, “The Chicanos: An Overview,” Edmundo García-Girón defines the term “Chicano” as one that:

...reflects the pronunciation of the grapheme X in Spanish. In Old Spanish the sign X denoted the palatal sibilante sound *s̃* (English *sh*). The Spaniards used the grapheme to transcribe the Nahuatl *s̃* in *Mexica* (Meshica), as the Aztecs called themselves. But by the middle of the seventeenth century the sound of X had changed to the palatal affricate *c̃* (English *ch*, as in church): México and mexicano sounded like *Méchico* and *mechicano*. *Chicano*, then is an aphaeresis of *mechicano*. (87)

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s, many Mexican Americans wanted to reconnect with their cultural roots. After many years of oppression and stigmatization and search for meaning and identity, they were encouraged to reach beyond their Spanish language and their Latin American history, and back to the pre-Hispanic heritage of the Aztecs. Eventually, the name was shortened from Mechicanos to Chicanos. Since the modern societies in both the United States and Mexico tended to marginalize the experiences of Mexican Americans this group had to go back further in history to find something that they could identify with and hold on to as the basis for their identity. They found it in the Mechicas (Aztecs) and appropriated the term Chicano.

The issue of this hybrid identity can be examined in light of the various dynamics at play in its very essence. The Chicano ethnic identity is an amalgamation of geographical, historical, political, economic, linguistic, and social factors. People who live along the

U.S./Mexico border understand the bi-nationality of their own existence. The values and lifestyle of one country has an immediate impact on the other. One has only to look back a few centuries in history to understand why there is such animosity between Mexicans and Americans relative to politics (The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Pancho Villa, the Mexican Revolution); economics (the decline of the Mexican peso against the U.S. dollar and the North American Free Trade Agreement); and social factors (second-generation Mexican Americans who wish to distance themselves from anything Mexican and yet are seen as the perpetual outsiders by both the Mexicans and the Americans) (Gracia *Hispanic/Latino* 52-60).

This confusion begins as a person discerns some sort of unique identity and tries to balance out the ideas of acculturation and assimilation. Instead of defining assimilation as a positive adaptation, Mexican Americans who don't attempt to retain their cultural origins and try to assimilate experience more psychological distress than those who preserve their mother culture and language. This comes as a result of trying to wipe the proverbial slate clean of any ethnic roots in hopes of identifying with the majority culture as an American. In this manner, many Hispanic students play out the so-called "cultural schizophrenia" by identifying as Mexican in their homes and respective communities, and as American in school and work environments (Idler 41-43).

This continued struggle comes as a result of having to survive in a dominant culture where their identity as ethnic minorities goes hand in hand with an alleged lack of power. Relative to identity development, Mexican American and Chicano/a students are made well aware of their lack of power with respect to their understanding of their place within the Mexican and the American societies. Continued exposure to prejudice and discrimination based on their status as ethnic minorities lead these students to perceive themselves as disempowered and unable to take pride in their ancestry or in their heritage language, which is Spanish (Gracia *Latinos in America* 113-115).

At stake in this situation are issues of assimilation and integration versus cultural preservation. In other words, individuals are trying to see if they can become part of the majority culture and are trying to figure out whether they will be able to achieve this without having to give up their home culture or ethnic identity. If they are to accept the doctrine called for by the melting pot theory, then they will indeed have to give up the ethnicity and language of their home culture in order to become part of the amalgamation of a new person and as a member of the dominant culture and language, hence the confusion experienced by many (Idler 180-81).

This confusion is further complicated because many Mexican Americans choose to live the ideal perception of what they think the Mexican culture is, and not what they know it to truly be in real life. In fact, for some Mexican Americans and Chicanos the relation to their Mexican heritage is a matter of abstract interpretation and in the presence of 'real' Mexicans, these very same people sometimes undermine these abstractions because they cannot balance reality of the contemporary Mexican culture with what they perceive it to be symbolically, or at the very least, an abstraction. What this means is that these individuals would rather live with their ideal perceptions of what the Mexican culture is than to face the realities of what they know it to be in the present day (Idler 135-38).

In becoming a part of the dominant culture, many individuals are quick to try to forget their native roots and join the rest who have decided to become a part of the dominant culture. In many cases, they try to forget, or even deny that they know their first language. Many times, they try to Anglicize the pronunciation of the names in order to fit in better in an educational system or work environment dedicated to preserving mono-cultural, mono-lingual structures. However, the Chicano movement of the sixties and seventies constructed and celebrated an ethnic identity on the basis of *mestizaje* and tried to recover the indigenous and historical past. This wave continues to the present day, even as some individuals try to blend in with the dominant culture, in a situation “where cultural difference becomes the basis for creative synthesis” (Belgrad 249).

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of a third element that is “a new mestiza consciousness” (102) and shows how today’s society limits the roles of individuals into a dual identity instead of allowing them to develop naturally (101). Anzaldúa maintains that the reality in which many of these individuals live is simply that, one reality, and that there are many other ways to perceive the world around them and “break down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (102). What this means is that many people are willing to accept the reality they are given because it is easy and does not necessitate any effort on their part. Anzaldúa’s point is that there are many other realities in which people can live, but to achieve them, they must arrive at this new mestiza consciousness by asking questions and fighting against what they so easily accept, especially if the reality in which they live is prejudicial, oppressive, prosecutorial, or unjust.

Gloria Anzaldúa defines herself as a border woman (*Borderlands* 38). This establishes the theory of the new mestiza identity and of a border culture in particular. These two concepts are represented in the metaphor of the third country, part of both countries, yet something altogether new, very much like the third space proposed by Homi Bhabha. For Anzaldúa, the border is something indefinite and undetermined that has been created by the residue of a border that is not natural: “The U.S. – Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture” (25). Anzaldúa maintains that for many citizens of the United States, previous inhabitants of the region (Aztecs, Mexicans, Braceros, etc.) were transgressors of the established order and that the region itself has become an intersection, or crossing point (26-30).

The metaphor of the border has become one that defines a rebellious third space in which cultures both emerge and unite at the same time (*Borderlands* Preface). This reality gives form to national and cultural authenticity and promotes global and transnational processes. This has brought about a situation within the United States where the Chicano community has conscientiously decided to embrace an ambiguous identity as a culture. This new definition of subjectivity, says Anzaldúa, has been identified as the mestiza identity, taking parts of cultural practices where individuals identify themselves as both indigenous and Spanish:

That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This

assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its parts. That third element is a new consciousness – a mestiza consciousness – and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm (*Borderlands* 101-02).

The resulting fluidity of identity within two countries, two languages, and two cultures, says the Chicana theorist, has demonstrated the ability of border people to take part in discourses based on multiple identities, thereby creating a soul that is both the conqueror and the conquered at the same time (*Borderlands* 104).

For Anzaldúa, geographic locale serves as a third space where established concepts of national identity are re-examined. And yet, echoes and remnants of distinct nationalism persist within the generational historical memory, resulting in the eternal conflict between unity and separation specific to the area. Life along the U.S. / Mexico border is a unique experience mutually influenced by the Mexican and U.S. cultures, resulting in what can be considered a regional bi-national hybrid of both ways of life. These people quite literally live *entre dos mundos*, between two worlds, each defined by language, culture, and geography. As a result, they are the products of both.

In an interview conducted in March of 2014, Jose Ángel Gutierrez, pivotal figure in the Chicano Movement in Crystal City, Texas in the 1960's, explains this sense of urgency in the term Chicano. According to Gutierrez, one of the inherent traits of being a Chicano is a sense of despair and rage and of a mindset of wanting to get things done, a need to “find avenues to solutions to problems that were always recurring. And no one seemed to do that.” The sense of urgency does indeed speak to inherent human nature.

In his book, *Brown Gumshoes: Detective Fiction and the Search for Chicana/o Identity*, Ralph E. Rodriguez describes the Chicano as the perpetual outsider relative to both the Mexican and the American societies. The continued feeling of always being on the outside looking in, of always being the alien, is what resonates with Chicano/a readers, who see themselves as always represented as being aliens in their own country.

The dominant feeling and attitude of most Chicanos living in a world that has developed after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is that they don't belong on either side of the U.S./Mexico border (6). The feeling of alienation comes from being considered a perpetual foreigner in the United States and from being considered one who went north and abandoned his language, culture and history in Mexico. In the crime novel, *Black Widow's Wardrobe* (1996), Lucha Corpi puts forth the idea of the perpetual outsider when her character, Dora, makes the following comment about the Chicano as an abandoned child, “We Chicanos are like the abandoned children of divorced cultures. We are forever longing to be loved by an absent neglectful parent – Mexico – and also to be truly accepted by the other parent – the United States” (147-48).

To summarize, the Chicano identity is the product of two or more historical, cultural, literary, linguistic, and social paradigms. Per the theories on hybridity as developed by Homi Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldúa, one can see how migrants that traverse to and from, within and without the Chicano experience transcend boundaries and carry with them historically and socially specific economic, political, cultural, and religious practices and identities. The interplay and interchange of social structure, migrant agency, and identity politics that determine the convergence and transnational confluence link people, places, and identities on both sides of the Atlantic (Smith 12) and on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border. Ultimately, we are descendants of the native peoples of North America because we are Mechicas, but we also carry the cultural and linguistic legacy of Spain, even as we maintain a hybrid identity within the United States of America.

Works Cited

- "An Interview with Jose Ángel Gutiérrez." Personal interview. 19 Mar. 2014.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999. Print.
- Belgrad, Daniel. "Performing Lo Chicano." *MELUS* 29.2 (2004): 249-264. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Corpi, Lucha. *Black Widow's Wardrobe*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1999. Print.
- García-Giron, Edmundo. "The Chicanos: An Overview." *Ethnic Literatures Since 1776: The Many Voices of America*. Part 1. Wolodymyr T. Zyla and Wendell M. Aycock, eds. Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 1978. Print.
- Gracia, Jorge J.E. *Hispanic / Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000. Print.
- *Latinos in America: Philosophy and Social Identity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. Print.
- Idler, José Enrique. *Officially Hispanic*. New York: Lexington Books, 2007. Print.
- Meier, Matt S. and Feliciano Rivera. *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Print.
- Rodriguez, Ralph E. "Cultural Memory and Chicanidad: Detecting History, Past and Present, in Lucha Corpi's Gloria Damasco Series." *Contemporary Literature* 43.1 (2002): 138-170. Print.
- *Brown Gumshoes: Detective Fiction and the Search for Chicana/o Identity*. Austin: Texas UP, 2005. Print.
- Smith, Michael Peter and John Eade. *Transnational Ties: Cities, Migrations, and Identities*. Comparative Urban and Community Research, Vol. 9. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008. Print.