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### UNSETTLING RACE, COLONIALITY, AND CASTE

Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*,  
Martinez's *Parrot in the Oven*, and  
Roy's *The God of Small Things*

What is termed globalization is the cultural process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism as a new global power.

(Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America')

This comparative essay on Chicano/a and South Asian narratives has a somewhat sweeping character. It is a preliminary attempt to link *pensamiento fronterizo* (border thinking) in Chicano/a Studies and realist interpellations of the subject and the politics of unsettling the coloniality of power on a planetary scale. *Pensamiento fronterizo* emerges from the critical reflections of (undocumented) immigrants, migrants, *bracero/a* workers, refugees, *campesinos*, women, and children on the major structures of dominance and subordination of our times. Thus envisaged, *pensamiento fronterizo* is the name for a new geopolitically located thinking from the borderlands of Americanness and against the new imperialism of the USA.<sup>1</sup> *Pensamiento fronterizo* is a necessary and affiliated tool for thinking about what the Peruvian historical social scientist Anibal Quijano calls the 'coloniality of power' and identity at the intersections (*los intersticios*) of our local *historias* and the double logics of capitalism and the cultures of US imperialism.<sup>2</sup>

Quijano's coloniality of power, I argue, can help us begin to account for the entangled relations of power between the global division of labor, racial and ethnic hierarchy, identity formation, and Eurocentric epistemologies. Moreover, the coloniality of power can help us trace the continuous forms of hegemonic dominance produced by colonial cultures and structures. As I use it, the coloniality of power is fundamentally a structuring process of identity, experience, and knowledge production articulating geo-strategic locations and subaltern (minor) inscriptions.

My emphasis will be on late twentieth-century postcolonial narratives (Chicano/a and South Asian) and early twenty-first century realist theories about identity, interculturality, and minoritized studies. So I'll begin by discussing three of the most important paradigms of minoritized study as forms of culture which have shared experiences by virtue of their antagonistic relationship to the hegemonic culture, which seeks to marginalize and interpellate them as minor.<sup>3</sup> Then I will examine the issue of border thinking and braided languaging practices in Gloria Anzaldúa's celebrated *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and Victor Martinez's National Book-Award winning novel *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*. Last, I will speculate on the issue of epistemic privilege and kinship trouble in Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*.

Why propose a cross-genealogical (US Latino/a and South Asian) treatment of differently structured histories of border and diaspora identity and minoritized writing? I hope this will emerge as I go along, and indeed throughout this special issue of *Cultural Studies* (designed as it is by Walter D. Mignolo and Lawrence Grossberg to encourage in-depth, cross-cultural comparisons within the matrix of globalization's coloniality of power). But I'll begin by asserting some of the potential meanings and nuances of the minor as they have appeared on the scene of US subaltern studies in the past fifteen years.

### The politics of 'becoming minor'

In a landmark 1987 conference at the University of California, Berkeley, the literary theorists Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd called for a radical examination of the 'nature and context of minority discourse'.<sup>4</sup> JanMohamed and Lloyd were specifically interested in rethinking the relationship between a 'minor literature' and the canonical literatures of the majority. Schematically put, Lloyd and JanMohamed's theory and practice of minority discourse involves 'drawing out solidarities in the forms of similarities between modes of repression and struggles that all minorities experience separately but precisely as minorities' (1990, p. 9). Their project of minority discourse fundamentally supplemented Deleuze and Guattari's theorizing of a minor literature — a literature so termed by its 'opposition to those which define canonical writing'. A minor literature entails for them 'the questioning or destruction of the concept of identity and identification . . . and a profound suspicion of narratives of reconciliation and unification' (1990, p. 381). In other words, Lloyd and JanMohamed maintained that a 'minority discourse should neither fall back on ethnicity or gender as an *a priori* essence nor rush into calculating some 'nonhumanist' celebration of diversity for its own sake' (1990, p. 9). While some realists might take issue with Lloyd and JanMohamed's dismissal

of the cognitive work of our identities and their overreliance of the Eurocentric work of Deleuze and Guattari's (their erasure of the cognitive aspects of racialized minority experiences and identities), the political project of minority discourse remains on target: 'Becoming 'minor',' they write, 'is not a question of essence . . . but a question of position: a subject-position that in the final analysis can be defined only in political terms' (1990, p. 9).

My sense of the future of minoritized studies within the context of our globalized coloniality owes much to the theoretical work of my colleagues at Berkeley but it does not quite reproduce the nuances of the way Lloyd and JanMohamed use the term minor (following Deleuze and Guattari's famous study of Kafka).<sup>5</sup> In my own recent cross-genealogical work in Chicano/a and Americanness studies otherwise, on José Martí as a subaltern modernist, on the Cuban *testimonio* of Esteban Montejo and Miguel Barnet, and on 'Greater Mexico's' border modernism of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton and Américo Paredes for example, I have used the terms, subaltern and minor, to cast doubt not so much on our 'narratives of identity' but on the mainline narratives of the major, mainstream, and the hegemonic.<sup>6</sup> My emergent minority studies follows the lead of the Coloniality of Power and Americanness Group (especially Walter Dignolo, Enrique Dussel, and Quijano) and the South Asian Subaltern Group, particularly the work of historian Dipesh Chakrabarty. As Chakrabarty suggests in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, '[the minor] describes relationships to the past that the rationality of the [mainstream] historian's methods necessarily makes 'minor' or 'inferior' as something 'irrational' in the course of, and as a result of, its own operation'. The cultural and political work of the subaltern or minoritized historian, in Chakrabarty's words, is to 'try to show how the capacity (of the modern person) to historicize actually depends on his or her ability to participate in nonmodern relationships to the past that are made subordinate in the moment of historicization. History writing assumes plural ways of being in the world' (2000, p. 101).

This brings me to the third and most recent sense of minoritized studies: US minority studies as a comparative 'epistemic project' formulated by Mohanty, Moya, Hames-García, and Martín Alcoff. Against purely skeptical (postmodern and poststructuralist) attitudes toward identity, ethnic studies, and experience, they argue for a strong defense of critical multiculturalism and minority studies based on what they call 'realist' views.<sup>7</sup> (As a shorthand for this realist-inspired group of minority studies, I will focus in what follows on the collective project entitled *Reclaiming Identity*, edited by Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García.)

What Moya and Hames-García have done is to tease out — using Satya Mohanty's realist view of identity — a new way of doing literary, cultural, and comparative ethnic studies in the United States. *Reclaiming Identity* is at the very center of what the authors (after Mohanty) call a 'postpositivist realism',

an engaging method of philosophical, cultural and literary interpretation that situates 'identity' in both a 'radical universalist' and a 'multiculturalist' world view (1997, p. xii). Briefly stated, *Reclaiming Identity* (like Mohanty's *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* [1997] and Moya's *Learning From Experience* [2002]) is a sustained, eloquent, and rich exemplification of this innovative method, practice, and pedagogy. Moya puts their collective project this way: the realist view of identity can provide 'a reconstructed universalist justification for the kind of work being done by . . . ethnic studies scholars', (p. 2) by supporters of multicultural education, as well as for the salience of the identities around which such minoritized programs are organized.

Although the *Reclaiming Identity* project gracefully eschews righteous polemic, the work they are engaged in demonstrates beyond dispute what a critically focused research collective and interdisciplinary project — that is, philosophy, social science theory, and the philosophy of science — can bring to literary studies proper. Indeed, Mohanty ends his erudite *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* by calling for a new kind of literary studies: 'we should go beyond the bounds of a purely text-based literary theory to engage more directly the findings of the various scientific disciplines. . . . [W]e [need] to make serious contact with the growing knowledge about the natural and social world and come to terms with the empirical implications of our claims' (1997, pp. 251–52). Thus envisaged, for Mohanty, Moya and Hames-García literary theory must be a site in which scholars and activists 'examine, debate, and specify the social implications of advances in the natural and social sciences' (1997, p. 252).

Ranging across issues involving philosophy, literature, and social theory, the essayists explore realist accounts of identity and experience by making linkages among social location, experience, epistemic privilege, and cultural identity.<sup>8</sup> All contemplate a world where cultural identity is both socially constructed and substantively real. By attempting to transcend the limits of postmodernism/poststructuralism and essentialism, the authors in *Reclaiming Identity* take seriously that (1) identities are real and (2) that experiences are epistemically crucial. As philosopher Martín Alcoff emphasizes, *Reclaiming Identity* 'is an act of taking back . . . the term realism in order to maintain the epistemic significance of identity' (2000, p. 312).

Because I'm working under some spatial constraints, I will only focus in the remainder of this section on the essays by Mohanty, Moya, Hames-García, and Martín Alcoff. *Reclaiming Identity* blasts off with Mohanty's minoritized philosophical exegesis of Toni Morrison's celebrated novel *Beloved*. 'The community sought' in the novel he argues, 'involves as its essence a moral and imaginative expansion of oneself'. Moreover, Morrison's 'political vision of the oppressed . . . provides the context' in which her characters challenge each others' views 'on the limits of mother-love' in specifically historical, gendered, and ethnoracial terms. Thus envisaged, Morrison's character's perspectives,

Mohanty suggests, are 'not only affective but also epistemic'. By reading Morrison's *Beloved*, many of us are therefore put in the position of characters in the novel, like Paul D, who have inadequate understandings of the social world they live in. Briefly, Morrison teaches us in *Beloved*, among other things, how to read infanticide and the social roles of slave mothers, thereby widening the scope of the moral debates about slavery and the gendered division of labor in the modern world system of capitalism.

Do slave mothers, like Morrison's Sethe, have a 'special knowledge' (2000, p. 236)? Can a realist account of identity spell out the claim that members of a diaspora often have a privileged, albeit sharable knowledge about their social world? What are the valuable implications that the epistemic privilege of the politically oppressed and socially underprivileged people have? These are the major interpretive questions Mohanty grapples with in his essay. If diaspora implicitly refers to an identity, and Morrison elaborates it in narratological and descriptive terms, Mohanty argues persuasively that readers of *Beloved* have been slow to see how Morrison elaborates diasporic identity in unavoidably moral and theoretical terms. Thus instead of seeing Morrison's characters as 'empty signifiers' and therefore dismissing her take on identities on the grounds that they are after all rhetorically constructed and hence 'spurious', Mohanty argues that identities in *Beloved* are not only descriptive and affective but also evaluative and epistemic. Hence, realists need to distinguish between different kinds of constructedness and at the same time see the politics of identities as enmeshed in competing social and ethical-theoretical world views. Last, Mohanty sets the *Reclaiming Identity* project in motion by arguing for a notion of 'epistemic privilege' — that our experiences have real cognitive content and that deconstructive suspicions of experience (Joan Scott [1992] and Jonathan Culler [1982]) are unwarranted.

Building upon Mohanty's realist view of identity and his ideas about epistemic privilege, Moya and Hames-García complement and enlarge the realist view of the project by reading Cherríe Moraga's *Loving in the War Years* and Michael Nava's *The Hidden Law* as contributing to understandings of how the minoritized 'other' can change us, and how issues that challenge identity such as heterogeneity, multiplicity, and hybridity do not have to be seen as separate entities but as 'mutually constitutive'. If Moraga, as Moya suggests, 'understands identities as relational and grounded in the historically produced social categories that constitute social location' (2000, p. 69) and not as trapped in a cyborgian 'signifying function' à la Donna Haraway (1991), Nava's work, Hames-García argues, 'demands that we . . . take seriously the moral implications' of Henry Rios's experiences. For Hames-García, taking Henry's experiences seriously does not make him a 'strategic essentialist' à la Chakravorty Spivak (1988); rather Henry bases his claim on the 'moral sense of his right to participate in a Chicano community on the basis of his cultural upbringing and experience of racialization' (2000, p. 113).

In the book's conclusion, 'Who's Afraid of Identity Politics?' philosopher Martín Alcoff carefully defends the new postpostivist accounts of identity by discussing how approaches to the self developed by Hegel, Freud, Foucault, and Althusser have had on the most important postcontemporary conceptions of identity and subjectification. The answer to the problems of essentialism and anti-essentialism, Martín Alcoff argues, is not political scientist's Wendy Brown's theory of 'wounded attachments' (where the cycle of blame is never transcended) but new, better alternative formulations of identity produced by the essayists in *Reclaiming Identity*.<sup>9</sup> Near her essay's ending, Martín Alcoff writes, 'To say that we have an identity is just to say that we have a location in social space, a hermeneutic horizon that is both grounded in a location and an opening or site from which we attempt to know the world. Understood in this way, it is incoherent to view identities as something we would be better off without' (2000, p. 335).

Given this précis of what I take to be one of the central aims of the *Reclaiming Identity* project, I would like to end this section by raising two issues for further interrogation. The first concerns the issue of identity in relationship to what the historical social scientists Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein call 'Americanity' and what Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Agustín Lao-Montes, Ramón Grosfoguel, and others are calling 'the coloniality of power'.<sup>10</sup>

In their essay, 'Americanity as a concept, or the Americas in the modern world-system' (1992), Quijano and Wallerstein argue that the Americas were fundamental to the formation of the modern (colonial) world-system, and that Americanity is a fundamental element of modernity. For our purposes, Quijano and Wallerstein identify four new categories that originated in the so-called discovery of the Americas. They are: coloniality, ethnicity, racism, and the concept of newness itself. My first hesitation with the *Reclaiming Identity* project thus has to do with the way most of the contributors are generally silent about our identities in relationship to what Quijano and Wallerstein are grappling with in their work, namely, coloniality.

In other words, if Mohanty, Moya, Hames-García, and Martín-Alcoff are right that to have an identity means that we have to understand that 'we have a location in social space', wouldn't it be useful for us to ground these identities and locations in the history of the modern (colonial) world-system? Quijano and Wallerstein remind us that after all coloniality created a structure of hierarchy and drew new boundaries around and within the Americas. Moreover, coloniality was also essential to the formation of states, and Quijano in his more recent work such as 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America' makes the additional claim that even in decolonization the stateness of decolonized states recentered the colonial structure of power. 'What is termed globalization', Quijano writes, 'is the cultural process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentered



capitalism as a new global power. One of the fundamental axes of power is the social classification of the world's population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its rationality. The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than colonialism in whose matrix it was established. Therefore the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality' (2000, p. 533).

For Quijano and Wallerstein, ethnic identity fundamentally is 'the set of communal boundaries into which in part we are put by others [through coloniality], in part which we impose upon ourselves, serving to locate our *identity* and our rank within the state. . . . [Ethnic identities] are always contemporary constructs, and thus always changing. All the major categories, however, into which we ethnically divide today in the Americas and the world (Native Americans or Indians, Blacks or Negroes, Whites or Creoles/Europeans, *Mestizos* or other names given to a so-called mixed-category) — all these categories did not exist prior to the modern world-system. They are part of what makes up Americanness. They have become the cultural staple of the entire world-system' (my emphasis, 1992, p. 550).

If our identities are real and affective, they do come from somewhere. Any postcontemporary account of subjectification (Butler, Laclau, Žižek [2000]) and any postpostivist realist account of identity (Mohanty, Moya, and Hames-García), I believe, would have to grapple with the 'colonial difference' that Quijano and Wallerstein, among others, are outlining for us. Perhaps to get back to Martín Alcoff's concluding riffs on the realist view of identity that is why it might not be so dizzying for some to view identities as something we might be better off without. Michel Foucault, for instance, noted in 'The Subject and Power' that the point is 'not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are' (1982, p. 212). But here, too, I'd stress that Foucault tends, especially in *The History of Sexuality*, to erase the crafty details of the colonial difference in his analysis of biopower. On the whole, however, I'm in strong agreement with Martín Alcoff's point about the political power of our identities. In our informational culture and society, our identities, Berkeley sociologist Manuel Castells insists in *The Power of Identity*, are crucial and important because 'they build interests, values, and projects, around experience, and refuse to dissolve by establishing a specific connection between nature, history, geography, and culture'. Identities, Castells concludes (in Marxist realist fashion), 'anchor power in some areas of the social structure, and build their resistance or their offensives in the informational struggle about the cultural codes constructing behavior and, thus, new institutions' (1997, p. 361). And it is this new subject or identity project of the informational mode of production, I believe, that many 'straight' marxists have refused to grapple with in their engagement with the powers of identity politics.

This issue of ‘coloniality’ then leads to another hesitation I have with the rich *Reclaiming Identity* project of Mohanty, Moya, and Hames-Garcia. In his recent book, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000), Mignolo draws on the social scientific work of Quijano and Wallerstein to criticize various recent desires for universalist theories among both neo-liberals and neo-marxists. Mignolo argues that parallel to the ethno-racialized classification of the Americas and the world (the embalming of identities) the colonial project in the Americas also classified languages and knowledges. The epistemology of the European Renaissance was, therefore, assumed to be the natural perspective for which knowledges could be described and suppressed. This same process, Mignolo suggests, was resituated after the Enlightenment, when the concept of reason opened up a new description and reason became associated with northern Europe and indirectly with whiteness (Hegel and Kant).

What are we to make of Mohanty and Moya’s use of an apparently idealist Kantian ‘universalism’ in their postpositivist realist project? Shouldn’t a realist view of identity severely criticize the abstract hegemonic universalisms in Kant and the Enlightenment? Is it possible to imagine an ‘epistemic diversity or pluriversality’, as Mignolo (drawing on the work of Glissant) suggests in his work on Zapatismo? For Mignolo, diversity is not ‘the rejection of universal claims, but the rejection of universality understood as an abstract universal grounded in a monologic’. Further, he writes, a ‘universal principle grounded on the idea of the di-versal is not a contradiction in terms but rather a displacement of conceptual structures’ (‘Zapatistas’ Theoretical Revolution’, 2002).

As an alternative to the Kantian universalism in Mohanty and Moya’s post-positivist realist project, I propose that Gloria Anzaldúa, Victor Martinez, and Arundhati Roy’s imaginative works belong to a ‘diversalist’ cross-genealogical field that I term (after Quijano) the coloniality of border and diaspora power. Coloniality, because of the many structural and ethno-racial similarities about identity formations binding them to a colonizing past. But border and diaspora power because there are certainly many discontinuities: — the outernational dimension of represented space — to dictate the cognitive metaphor of the ‘world-system’ text, which recalls as I have been suggesting the world political economy of Wallerstein and Quijano.

The category of the coloniality of power is not, of course, without its defects. But it has fewer than others, as well as having some local and global additional advantages. So let the coloniality of power be taken in my essay for what it is: a hypothesis designed to grapple with hierarchy based on what Quijano terms the ‘social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race’. The racial axis of *mestizaje* in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, of peasants in Martinez’s poem, ‘Shoes’, and of caste in Roy’s *The God of Small Things* have colonial origins in the Américas and South Asia, but Anzaldúa, Martinez, and Roy suggest that race, peasantry, and caste have proven to be more durable in our so-called postcolonial world.



By cobbling together Quijano's subalternist concept of the coloniality of power and Wallerstein's modern world-system, we can argue that the coloniality of power has survived in the Americas and South Asia (the Portuguese brought with them to India the idea of caste) for over 500 years and yet they have not come to be transformed into a world empire. The secret strength of the coloniality of power and the world system is the political side of economic organization called capitalism. Capitalism, Wallerstein astutely argues, has flourished precisely because the world-economy 'has had within its bounds not one but a multiplicity of political systems' (1974, p. 348).

### The borderlands of Chicano/a narrative and subaltern studies

Over the past decade an awareness has begun to develop of the affinities between the imaginative work of recent Chicano/a imaginative writers and the thought of US migratory postcolonial thinkers. Indeed, what is remarkable is that it should have taken so long for the interlocking of concerns between Chicano/a writers and postcolonial thinkers to be properly appreciated. Among the most prominent of such common concerns are: the location of knowledge from the perspective of the US empire's borderland contact zones; the critique of Occidental dominant perspectives in the current practices of US social sciences, humanities, and area studies; and the grappling with localized geopolitics of knowledge and what the theorist Mignolo calls 'border epistemologies'.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, these affinities have not only been observed by scholars from the South (Latin America and South Asia) for example, but also are becoming part of the self-consciousness in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called the 'emerging dominant' (1995, p. 179) in American Studies.

This section is a study of the interplay between the performative, border epistemologies of two Chicano/a imaginative writers and the changing discourses of American vernacular literatures and cultures. Gloria Anzaldúa and Victor Martinez's writings about US Latino/a life explore, among other things, the linguistic intermixture of ethnic and mainstream languages (English, Spanish, and Spanglish) to illustrate the changing languages of America. What vernacular varieties of English or Spanish will dominate in twenty-first century America? Which *lingua rustica* will the some thirty million US Latinos/as (with over 10 million in California) hegemonize in their *testimonios*, novels, essays, and poetry? What new literary genres, produced by Chicanos/as, will emerge in American literature? If the 'dialect novel' was all the rage in late nineteenth century vernacular America<sup>12</sup> (Twain, Cable, Cahan, Du Bois), is there a borderlands English or Spanglish already underway in US Latino/a dominant California, Arizona, Florida, Texas, Illinois, and New York? On another level, I want to investigate the enabling condition of some recent Chicano/a narrative and poetry and the various ways in which they seek to create an

epistemological ground upon which versions of the world may be produced. As many US Latino/a writers themselves suggest, to read is to question and to understand the (bilingual) texture and the rhetorical resources of language. If Anzaldúa sees the aesthetic structure of knowledge as a form of *nepantilism*, a Mexica word signifying cultural in-betweenness, Martinez sees minority writing as a form of the California borderlands of subaltern studies informing mass youth US Latino/a culture.<sup>13</sup>

To begin, I will juxtapose Gloria Anzaldúa's key concept of US-Mexico border *nepantilism* (1987) against US historian Frederick Jackson Turner's well-known nineteenth century idea of the frontier. I do so to emphasize that while Turner and Anzaldúa may share some affinities of narrative and subaltern conventions and self-locations in the United States — each writer locates their stories in a tradition of border historiography — their contrasts, I think, run far deeper, for Turner's paradigms of the 'frontier' and Anzaldúa's *frontera* are not equivalent.

One of the most imperial images of the American West, Turner's so-called frontier thesis helped shape the study of Americanization both domestically, and after the War of 1898, globally. US historian William Cronin suggests that 'few historical arguments [about the significance of the frontier in American history] have risen so high and fallen so far in [US] scholarly reception' (1995, p. 692). In a more recent overview, US historian Kerwin Klein put Turner's significance this way: he 'introduced a new vocabulary into history by using old words in a new way, borrowing terms from other disciplines, and mixing these elements' (1997, p. 13). In other words, Turner had flair and a gift for mixing what social scientists call 'nomothetic' and 'idiographic' epistemologies and discourses.

Turner famously opens his 1893 essay by quoting from the 1890s census report that described empirically the disappearance of the frontier. Moreover, in a nomothetic vein, Turner theorized that US modernity and modernization were caused by the frontier, for 'free land and its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development' (1920, p. 1). By emphasizing the movement westward, Northeastern, Euro-Americans not only encountered peoples and cultures 'less civilized' than they had experienced, but through this very contact, Turner argued, they had left behind their old world civilization and invented a new, North American one.

As Klein suggests, Turner's essay 'narrates a dramatic struggle between past and present'. Turner's compositional mode of emplotment rolls out from East to West; from the Puritan's errand into the wilderness to the Gilded Age's San Francisco. If Turner starts off quoting social scientific data (census reports), he quickly moves his essay into the mythos of romance. His invocations of the colonial frontier heroes (Daniel Boone, Andrew Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln) are, as Klein notes, perfect 'synecdoches for the American frontier spirit' (1997, p. 183).

All of the familiar themes of the US cultures of imperialism are cobbled together here in Turner's 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' — the advancing of the frontier, the free land, or the nineteenth century's equivalent of the twentieth century US food stamp program, and the conquering of and the errand into the wilderness. Throughout Turner is gracefully straightforward: 'the frontier prompted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people' (1920, 40). And one of my favorite lines in the essay reveals Turner's poetic flair: 'In the crucible of the frontier, the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into one mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics' (1920, p. 40).

If Klein sees Turner's essay moving in the direction of an Emersonian and Hegelian universalism, other US historians such as Richard White locate Turner's essay as part of an emerging incantatory imperialism. By strategically using a frontier iconography in his essay — log cabins, covered wagons, canoes, and the like — Turner argued for a Jeffersonian 'empire for liberty', surely one of our most interesting nationalist oxymorons for the cultures of US imperialism (White 1994). And like White, US Latino historian George Sánchez, too, chastises Turner for constructing 'a myopic vision' in his frontier essay — 'that of the East looking West, civilization looking toward chaos, Europe looking toward the rest of the world' (1993, p. 38). Conversely, against Turner's hegemonic vision, Sánchez suggests that the concept of the transnational *frontera* developed in postcolonial Chicano/a studies works against Turner's myopic imperialism. The transnational *frontera*, he argues, suggests 'limitations, boundaries over which American power might have little or no control. It implies a dual vision, that of two nations looking at each other over a strip of land they hold in common (1993, p. 38). US Latino/a border thinking, therefore, enacts a powerful contrapuntal corrective for mainline American studies.

In thinking about the emplotments of Turner's frontier essay and Anzaldúa's *frontera* thinking in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, it might be productive to consider what historian James Clifford has noted about the diaspora emplotments of Paul Gilroy's postcolonial *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987). Diaspora cultures, Clifford writes, are 'produced by regimes of political domination and economic inequality'. These cultures, moreover, 'cannot claim an oppositional or primary purity. Fundamentally ambivalent, they grapple with the entanglement of subversion and the law, of invention and subversion — the complicity of dystopia and utopia' (1997, p. 265).

Does Anzaldúa's Chicana paradigm of the US-Mexico borderlands share in expressing diaspora culture's dystopic-utopian tensions? Is there both bad news and good news built into the text? Can Anzaldúa's recodification of the utopian otherwise as *nepantilism* help us better ground or grapple with the tensions and ambivalences that Clifford theorizes in his reading of the work of Gilroy? What

are we to make of Anzaldúa's deportation stories, of her invocation of the US-Mexico War of 1846–48, of the post Jim Crow ethnoracial hierarchies in South Texas, of the international division of labor with undocumented women at the center of the *maquiladoras*, and of her dramatic swerve to Mexica *nepantilism* and new mestiza consciousness in *Borderlands/La Frontera*?

Border gnosis or border thinking, for Anzaldúa, is a site of criss-crossed experience, language, and identity. Mignolo's postcolonial reading of Anzaldúa is especially helpful in this context. She draws, Mignolo insists, 'a different map: that of reverse migration, the migration from colonial territories relabeled the Third World (after 1945), toward the First' (2000, 237). And this reverse US Latino/a migratoriness, in Mignolo's view, helps explain Anzaldúa's powerful 'linguaging practices' which 'fracture the colonial language' (2000, p. 237).

If Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera* thematizes not the hegemonic Hegelian-Emersonian universalism of Turner's frontier thesis, but the epistemic diversal reason of Greater Mexico's local *nepantilism*'s multiple broken tongues, 'such fractures', Mignolo argues, 'occur due to the languaging practices of two displaced linguistic communities' in Anzaldúa's work: 'Nahuatl, displaced by the Spanish expansion and Spanish displaced by the increasing hegemony of the colonial languages of the modern period (English, German, and French)' (2000, p. 237).

This fracturing and braiding of colonial and postcolonial languages explains why Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* has the power to elicit such critical emphasis from Mignolo, one of the most innovative US Latino critics of postcolonial literatures of the Americas. Reading Anzaldúa as a Chicana feminist philosopher of fractured and braided languages is precisely what I want to address below as both one of the major postcolonial issues in *Borderlands/La Frontera* and indeed for US Latino/a studies in particular, and for the futures of minority studies in general.

Rather than a unified subject, representing a folk border culture in any holistic sense, we meet in Anzaldúa's Chicana neologism, *autohistoriateoría*,<sup>14</sup> a braided, mestiza consciousness, and a feminist writer fundamentally caught between various hegemonic colonial and postcolonial languages and subaltern dialects, and vernacular expressions. Her lament that 'wild tongues' such as her own 'can not be tamed' for 'they can only be cut out' (1987, p. 76) might as well be addressed to Anzaldúa's complex postcolonial audience of radical women and (feminist) men of color. Throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa expresses regret that even her bilingual mother in Hargill, has been partially complicit in valuing the English language of the hegemonic: 'I want you to speak English. Pa' hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Que vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un 'accent', my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. At Pan

American University, I, and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents' (1987, p. 76).

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa not only self-consciously speaks English with an 'accent', she also writes in multiply accented, vernacular tongues. Read with its marked accentuation, Anzaldúa's work can be reinterpreted as expressing a late North American situation of multidialectism. Her negative dialectical answers to her earlier meditations that she will not 'tame a wild tongue', or 'train it to be quiet', or 'make it lie down' (1987, p. 76) are her feminist philosophical dictums of border language and thinking. At the very heart of Anzaldúa's Chicana feminist *autohistoriateoría* is her claim that a braided 'tongue' is centrally and dramatically at war with colonialism, US Empire, patriarchy, and androcentrism's project to silence women: 'Ser habladora was to be a gossip or a liar' (1987, p. 76).

Anzaldúa's response to being preoccupied with 'the unique positioning consciousness takes at these confluent streams' (1987, p. i) is apprehended linguistically in the text in the juxtaposition of multiple dialects or tongues — Tex Mex, *caló*, *choteo*, Spanish and English — with their dominant and subaltern varieties. Moreover, this linguistic juxtaposition allows us to see Anzaldúa's attempts to reflect post-Jim Crow ethnoracial practices in South Texas as well as attempts at *nepantilism* — however incomplete — to merge, transculture, and braid different ethnoracial formations and languages in a single text. As she puts it, she struggles with an 'almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows' (1987, p. i). In this regard, Anzaldúa's *conciencia de la nueva mestiza* seems to be a respectful and gendered updating of W. E. B. Du Bois's famous early twentieth century insights in *The Soul of Black Folks* (1903) about the cross-linguistic foundations of double consciousness and the shadows of the color line:

One ever feels a two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the Negro is the history of this strife . . . ,to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. . . . He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of *white Americanism*, for he knows that Negro blood has a *message* for the world.

(1986, pp. 364–365, my emphasis).

My point is that Anzaldúa, like Du Bois, sees her braided Chicana consciousness as a fractured, cracked, and braided construction, an effort to merge new cultural formations and ethnoracial subjectivities. Like Du Bois, she, too, highlights the inherent US linguistic wars both inside the body of the

nation and in the body of her soul, for like the US-Mexico border itself, it is 'an open wound, dividing a *pueblo*, a culture, /running down the length of my body, / [it] splits me, splits me/ me raja, me raja' (1987, p. 24). Both Du Bois and Anzaldúa call for new ethnic, linguistic, and cultural exchanges between the South and the North. If, for Du Bois at the beginning of the twentieth century blackness and whiteness were inextricably woven together, then, for Anzaldúa at the century's end Chicana, Latina, African American, and Euro-American vernacular English and Spanish have been knitted together into what Du Bois called 'the very warp and woof of this nation'. This 'colonial difference' is crucial to emphasize for those of us tracking Chicano/a studies' shifting and shifty cross-genealogy from the matrix of globalization's coloniality.

In arguing for the centrality of human language rights in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, I mean to support Mignolo's critical, subaltern, US Latino/a, postcolonial evaluations of Anzaldúa's 'border *gnosis*' without losing sight of the importance of the author's multiple renaming processes and her radical recodifications of womanhood. As Chicana feminist scholars such as Norma Alarcón, Chela Sandoval, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, Sonia Saldivar-Hull, and Paula Moya have all rigorously and gracefully argued, *Borderlands/La Frontera* is fundamentally a Chicana feminist text; a first-rate *historia* of post-Jim Crow South Texas; a jolting new positioning of the native woman in Chicana Studies; a terrific study in comparative whiteness and brownness; and post-postivist realist call for identity and social justice.<sup>15</sup> Yet what is perhaps an equally powerful feature of Anzaldúa's text has also been one of its least analyzed — Anzaldúa's discussion of *nepantlism* as a braided, US Latino/a linguistic consciousness. *La conciencia de la nueva mestiza*, for Anzaldúa, is 'neither español ni inglés, but both'. It is a consciousness of *nepantla*, a Mexica term, signifying in betweenness, and which is 'capable of communicating the real values' of the US-Mexico borderlands to others (1987, p. 77).

In arguing for the centrality of her 'forked', 'wild', and active feminist tongues, Anzaldúa emphasizes that these tongues are informed with other, border-crossing tongues: 'los recién llegados, Mexican immigrants, north from Mexico', and the older tongues of the 'braceros' (p. 78). And to these vernacular tongues, she merges her Tex-Mex dialects that she uses with her brothers and sisters and the 'secret language of *pachuco*, a language of rebellion' (p. 78) in order to create a foundational consciousness of the new mestiza.

Read against recent legal attempts in California and Florida (states with large US Latino/a populations) to force an English-only linguistic absolutism, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* offers readers a dialect centered anti-absolutism, for there 'is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience' (1987, p. 80). In her own testimonial theorization of



experience, when in high school she was ‘encouraged to take French classes because French [was] considered more ‘cultured’,’ she ends by noting that ‘Spanish speakers will comprise [by 2005] the biggest [minority] group in the USA’ (1987, p. 81). However, she also argues that by the end of the twentieth-century, a braided ‘Chicana/o’ English ‘will be the mother tongue of most’ (1987, p. 81) Chicanas/os.

If I have focused on what may seem one of many issues, what Anzaldúa terms the practices and resistances of ‘tam [ing] a wild tongue’, my goal has been to highlight various things at once: to agree with Anzaldúa’s insistence on the centrality of *nepantilism* as a minoritized and postcolonial linguistic project; and to explore *nepantilism* as the author’s attempt to merging multiple subaltern and vernacular ‘serpent tongues – my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice’ (p. 81).

The souls of the outernational new mestizas, Anzaldúa argues, have ‘nothing to do with which country one lives in’. They are ‘neither eagle or serpent, but both’ (p. 85). It is precisely this going beyond the two-ness of national consciousness that Anzaldúa aspires to in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. If US literary historian Gavin Jones is right that at the heart of nineteenth century American literature was what he calls ‘the cult of the vernacular’ with real ‘political and cultural functions’, (1999) Anzaldúa’s *autohistoriateoría* grounds her late twentieth century work in the differential vernacular serpent’s tongue, a catechistic subalternist tongue which is capable of cracking, fracturing, and braiding the very authority of the master’s English-only tongue.

This awareness of an interstitial in-betweenness empowers revisionist Chicano/a narratives and transmodernist poetry. Victor Martinez’s *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* (1996) is a splendid case in point. To better locate Martinez’s double-voiced, vernacular novel, I will begin by exploring a poem the author wrote entitled ‘Shoes’ (1992), an everyday symbol that reappears in the novel about gangs, *klikas*, and youth cultures in California:

Out of all of our enemies, all the catastrophes of nations  
scattered to rubble, plowed over with salt, we still have  
the warm friendliness, the unrelenting spirit  
of our shoes to console us.  
Two bubbles chopped square out of shapeless emptiness  
how this invention hisses in a hurry to correct time  
pumping little sneezes of sympathy for our tardiness.  
Although they owe us nothing, they walk  
in many of our dreams, conjuring music  
from a vaporous sidewalk or standing  
as pure reverence  
over the peaceful herds of our dead.  
They, who always return back to us faithfully

from every tropic, every desert,  
 to take us their jobs as stealth for the burglar,  
 spring under the killer's crouch, courage  
 for the guerrilla. They guard us  
 against thistles and thorns, protect us from stone  
 and unseen disasters of glass.  
 Wheels mean nothing to the shoe. They are the first  
 of peasants and would never think to kneel  
 before any god, or suck up to whatever tablet of the Law.  
 Ravenous for distance, they supply whole lives  
 with the loss of a mere heel  
 yet wear death, only once.

(1992, p. 12)

'Shoes', for Martinez, allows him to represent everyday things in the world, especially what he describes lyrically as 'the unrelenting spirit of our shoes' and how they often function 'to console us'. A flood of questions appears on the screen of transmodernist US 'border thinking': from what, specifically, do Martinez's shoes console us? From the 'elements of San Joaquin'; from the pesticides of California agribusiness? From the worldiness of the documented and undocumented farm worker world? From the *nepantilism* of our dwellings, the unhomeliness of mass, youth culture?

On an intertextual and transcultural frame of reference, Martinez's poem, 'Shoes', positions itself to comment audaciously on discussions of modernity and aesthetics, and by specifically alluding to such discussions embedded in Vincent Van Gogh's painting 'A Pair of Boots'. Why is Martinez interested in the debates surrounding modernist art? Does his poem grasp the structural and socially symbolic meanings of peasant 'shoes', and farmworker 'boots'? In his landmark book, *Postmodernism, Or the Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson argues that Van Gogh's painting unleashes the 'whole object of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty' (1991, p. 7). As an experienced former farm wage worker himself, Martinez's poem thematizes 'epistemic privilege' for the poem apprehends the brutalizing world of Agribusiness growers and their tussle with the wage earners, wage earners who, after 1965, were able to organize themselves through Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers Committee.

If, as Jameson suggests, Van Gogh's painting can only evoke the peasants' alienation of labor, who are themselves literally worn down like a pair of boots, the modernist painter can only represent this through his 'hallucinatory surface of color' (p. 7) sometimes, 'garishly overlaid with hues of red and green' (p. 7). In other words, Van Gogh's 'A Pair of Boots', like Martinez's California farm worker poem 'Shoes', embodies deep dystopian and utopian tensions and ambivalences that we earlier saw in Gilroy's and Anzaldúa's narratives of the US-Mexico borderlands and the Black Atlantic diaspora. I am

even tempted to argue, after Jameson, that both Martinez and Van Gogh's works of art can be rewritten 'acts of compensation which end up producing a new Utopian realm of the senses' (p. 7) — especially, through the visual in Van Gogh's painting and the figurative, tropological in Martinez's writing.

In this way, Martinez suggests, 'shoes' always return to us, they form the very in-betweenness in our post-bracero, North-South global division of labor in California. On another level, if as Martin Heidegger once put it, Van Gogh's 'A Pair of Boots' vibrates the silent call of the earth . . . its enigmatic self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field', (qtd. in Jameson, p. 8), Martinez's 'Shoes' is his attempt to represent the very Heideggerian-like 'equipment' necessary for migrant farm workers in California to make do: 'They are', Martinez writes, 'the first/ of peasants and would never think to kneel/before any God, or suck up to whatever tablets of the Law'.

Before we move on to a reading of *Parrot in the Oven*, I want to underline Martinez's use of the word, 'peasant' in his poem. What is the poet trying to link up in his meditation of Mexican American farmworkers and peasants? Is Martinez, like the South Asian subaltern historians, trying to democratize US poetry by looking on subordinate social groups — farmworkers and *campesinos* — as the makers of their own minoritized destiny? My own sense is that by his looking at farmworker/*campesino* shoes, Martinez is attempting to stretch the very category of the political far beyond the borders assigned to them in European and American political thought. Farmworkers are not pre-political or pre-modern in any senses of the terms. Like Ranajit Guha (1988, 1997) before him, Martinez insists that farmworkers are real contemporaries of the colonality of power in the modern Americas (not pre-modern or primitive rebels) and that they are a fundamental part of the modernity that colonality brought to the Americas some five hundred years earlier.

Let's now turn to Martinez's *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* (initially marketed by its New York publishers as a young adult novel) and contrapuntally read this young adult novel against his apparently more mature, modern, adult, philosophical poem, 'Shoes'? Do these works by Martinez have anything in common? Do they inform each other and help us do away with false dichotomies such as 'young adult' and 'adult' literature classifications? Why do mainline US publishers insist on infantilizing US Latino/a writers? Can a minoritized reading based on US Latino/a mass youth culture help us better ground Martinez's epistemological obsession with the gaps between the farm worker's earth and a post-developed California world? My firm sense is that Martinez's novel opens up fresh vistas on the relationship between mass culture and the social by transforming radically the genre of the so-called young adult novel itself.

If this emergent genre, like children's literature, is marginalized in the institutions of the academy, Martinez cross-cuts this subalternized form by focusing precisely on the ethnoracialized subalterns in California — especially,

the young *vatos firmes*, the Klikas, youth gangs, and their ritual initiations, what the Chicano hip pop artist Frost describes as the poetics of ‘las chavas, las balas, and the Chevy Impalas’ (1992). If historian Robin Kelley is right that ‘most rap music is not about a nihilistic street life but about rocking the mike’ (1997, p. 37), Martinez’s *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* takes it inventive linguistic lessons from the very youth culture it explores. What counts for Martinez is not just the Hernandez tussles in the barrio but the wild storytelling riffs and figures of speech of the young Chicano/a characters — especially Manny’s ability to make comparisons in his world, his often hilarious facility to see likenesses between unlike things, what Kelley argues is fundamental to most urban rap music, ‘the ability to kick some serious . . . linguistic inventiveness’ (p. 37). This is what Martinez’s rich *Parrot in the Oven* is fundamentally ‘about’.

Like Martinez’s ‘Shoes’, we can discern or discover the hermeneutical horizon of at least two levels or symptoms of reading. To begin with, *Parrot in the Oven* focuses on Manny Hernandez, a young homey from the barrio projects, who is determined to discover for himself what it means (existentially and cognitively) to be a *vato firme* — a guy to respect. This theme, the development or the education of the male hero’s coming of age, is the *bildung* of the young adult novel. Moreover, Martinez continually meditates on the related spaces of home and leisure, and à la Paul Gilroy and Robin Kelley, he sees the male body not only as an instrument of labor but also of pleasure. And, Manny, as we will see below, draws lots of pleasure through his intense labor of producing whirling figurative play.

As we begin reading *Parrot in the Oven* Manny lives in the barrio hood, somewhere in the projects of Sal Si Puedes, and attends the San Joaquin Valley’s J. Edgar Hoover High. Like the farm workers in ‘Shoes’, he has to make do and has to grapple with his working class family life — an alcoholic father, Manny Sr., an abused mother, Rebecca, who daily puts on a pair of worn out boots and mops the barrio casita’s floors, and his brothers and sisters. Manny comes of age here in Sal Si Puedes in a poetic series of fast-paced chapter-vignettes. Stylistically and rhetorically, Martinez maintains the specificity of his setting and mass youth characterization through his artful everyday vernacular dialogues, and through intense language, what we earlier discussed as his startling elegant poetic imagery in ‘Shoes’. Some of my favorite tropes include the following from Manny’s consciousness:

‘He could duck trouble better than a champion boxer could duck a right cross’. (p. 3)

Dad is always ‘cursing’, ‘simmering’, and ‘ready to boil over’ (p. 5).

Migrant farm workers are like ‘whirlwinds’ (p. 13).

‘She was just trying to blossom herself up’ (p. 59).

‘I had a face Dad said would look handsome on a horse’ (p. 80).

‘She worked hard for beauty, teasing her hair as an ocean wave’ (p. 92).

'Her shadow will be erased, and her soul will drift to heaven like a fluff of a dandelion in the wind. And then it will blossom in another garden, so bright the colors will hurt your eyes' (p. 89).

Against the tussles of everyday misery in Manny's barrio life, the world opens up its worldliness, through Martinez's poetic transpositions and metaphoric exchanges.

If Martinez's narrative focuses on the underside of the Hernandez family romance, *Parrot in the Oven* never lacks for compassion. Throughout, Manny wonders how his sisters and mother 'were able to stand it' (p. 12). Incredulously perhaps, Manny even makes fun of the profound alienation and pain of his father's abusive patriarchy by saying to himself 'deep down Dad liked me'. This has to be read contrapuntally, I suppose, against all the hard smacks given to him by his father. For even the title of the novel, *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*, evokes a male folk patriarchal bruising: 'Perico, or parrot, was what Dad called me sometimes. It was from a Mexican saying about a parrot that complains how hot it is in the shade, while all along he's sitting inside an oven. People usually say this when talking about ignorant people who don't know where they're at in the world' (pp. 51–52). In other words, Manny's dad thinks his son is a *pendejo*, pure and simple.

Manny, the young adult novel protagonist, however, survives and even triumphs over his father's awkward love, California's under-endowed ugly, Proposition 13 public schools, and countless barrio feuds by working himself through a final climactic gang initiation beating — he is punched and whacked with storms of claps, kicks, and bites. When it is over, Manny's young body swells all over and Martinez writes: 'I could smell the acidic stink of the dirt, but strangely enough, there was no fear. Nor could I feel those blows, which felt instead like instead of me, they were hitting a slab of meat on a table

... When they finally let me up, I sat there ... swelling fast, flaring alive with throbs' (p. 194).

Martinez's *Parrot in the Oven* ends by thinking not only about the body's pains and pleasures from the 'sonic' forces surrounding it, but also by narrating the cholo body's place, pursuing barrio spaces into some of its jolting corners and subtle surfaces. For Martinez, place is intriguing, valuable, pleasurable, and indispensable. Here at the novel's end, Manny forces us to face place, to confront it, and take off its masks:

When I opened the door to our house, the sun, out again, came rushing into the living room. Shadows lifted from the floor like a flock of birds rising into the horizon, and light guttered through the room, slapping away the dark for good ... Magda and Pedi were lying asleep ... Magda's hair was fanned out on a pillow, unteased. ... Then I sat down on Dad's

cushioned chair and watched them . . . and the room . . . And it was a wondrous place . . . My home. The light in the room was closing in around me.

(pp. 214–215)

### **Declaring oneself a ‘Mobile Republic’: South Asian kinship and identity**

In concluding this essay, I want to stay with the thematizations of minoritized identities and the coloniality matrix of power I outlined in a broad trans-American mapping of sorts, and examine briefly how postcontemporary South Asian writings in English of the memories of violence and identity may also help us think through the ‘colonial difference’ in a more global framework. I do not approach this question as a specialist in the history of the English novel in India. My relation to a globalized matrix of power is clearly at an early stage of thinking. However, what I have found in my preliminary readings of some of the most important English novels in India is this: at the center of many English novels in India are the histories and memories of violence and the coloniality of power — how humans produce absolutist others out of others. In this sense, narratives of the violence of colonialism in the English novel in India — Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* or Amitav Ghosh’s recent *The Hungry Tide*, for example — are also narratological studies of the politics of identity and the colonial difference. What animates many South Asian novels in English of the memories of violence of British coloniality, of the Partition of 1947, and beyond is the question of how to live within the context of global coloniality. At another level, South Asian (Indian) writers working in English (like Du Bois, Anzaldúa, and Martinez’s double and mextiza/o consciousness I highlighted above) must continually grapple with the colonial histories that form the very English language they and their characters use.<sup>16</sup>

The complexities of South Asian identities and kinship are at the heart of Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). Central to the novel is a vision of the continuity between knowing the world through experience and struggle and changing the central relations of the coloniality of power which sustain and make the world what it is. Additionally, subalternized characters in the novel, especially children, divorced women, and peasants defy bloodlines of kinship and caste to condemn the bloodsheds of their everyday world in Kerala. In so doing, they defy both the gods of dominance and of kinship to remember what they experienced and shared with the god of small things.



The radicalized sense of kinship sought in *The God of Small Things* involves an expanded standpoint positionality of oneself, in particular the ability to enlarge and enrich one's ability to experience.<sup>17</sup> Thus envisaged, readers can better understand the political terms of the debate over the coloniality of power, caste, and the normative principles of kinship within postcolonial Kerala that inform and shape the narrative: the debate between Ammu, the twins, Rahel and Estha, on the one hand, and Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and the local police on the other, about the (archaic) nature of so-called Untouchables in postcolonial Kerala. Did Velutha that 'cheerful man without footprints . . . count' (1997, p. 208), Ammu asks her children? Was it possible for Ammu, Rahel and Estha 'bounded by the certain, separate knowledge' to have really 'loved a man [Velutha] to death'? (p. 307). 'How could [Ammu] stand the smell? . . . They have a particular smell, these Paravans' (p. 243) Baby Kochamma asks when she hears from the peasant Vallya Paapen what Ammu and Velutha had done. How we evaluate this debate over the coloniality of power, the love laws, kinship, and the politics of the erotic depends upon how we interpret Rahel and Estha's remarkable transformation and defiance at the novel's end and how we see their melancholic relationship between their ability to experience and understand, their capacity to grieve for their mother Ammu and the peasant Velutha, and even perhaps how in their grieving they de-institute kinship.

Ammu's defiant response to her family's insistence in maintaining caste rules coherent in Keralan culture and society is to make the twins Rahel and Estha 'promise' her that they will 'always love each other' — especially in the face of what Roy refers to as the local 'love laws' which pin down 'who should be loved. And how. And how much' (p. 168). With this straightforward speech act of promise, Ammu tampers throughout the novel with the stable heteronormative issues of family, bloodlines, and the bourgeois nation. The political vision of the subaltern which Roy's *The God of Small Things* seeks primarily through the standpoint positionality of women, children, and peasants provides the context in which family members such as Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and the state police's support of caste and the coloniality of power can be challenged, made specific, and given meaning. These are the many idioms of dominance and subordination that Roy thematizes in the novel.

Ammu's capacity to know herself is directly related with her ability to feel with others and tussle with the normative rules of kinship in Kerala: 'It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day' (p. 44). While Ammu disgraces her bourgeois family by divorcing from an alcoholic and abusive husband and returns home with her young twins to her parents' home in Ayemenem, she intensely feels 'that

there would be no more chances. There was only . . . a front verandah and a back verandah. A hot river and a pickle factory . . . And in the background, the constant, high, whining mewl of local disapproval' (p. 42). It is Ammu's braided 'unmixable mix[ed]' subaltern consciousness of 'tenderness' and 'rage' that drives her feelings toward her children, toward the Untouchable Velutha, and her disapproving mewling family and local culture and society. The urgent assurances that the peasant and card-carrying communist Velutha provides Ammu with profoundly change her and her children. Velutha, I sustain, makes possible a qualitative cognitive reorientation through his 'beauty' and his labor and gifts for her, the children, and the family's business. 'As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labor had shaped him . . . Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace' (p. 316). Interestingly, Velutha is important not only because he is the god of small things in Kerala but also because of the qualitative joy he produces in others with his magician-like 'facility with his hands'. Velutha (since the age of eleven), Roy emphasizes, 'could make intricate toys — tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts. He would bring them for Ammu, holding them on his palm (as he had been taught) so she wouldn't have to touch him to take them (pp. 71–72).

Apart from his graceful carpentry and toy-making skills, Velutha 'mended radios, clocks, water pumps. He looked after the plumbing and all the electrical gadgets in the house' (p. 72). Years later, Velutha's creative engineering skills are used at Ammu's family's business where he reassembled 'bottle-sealing machines, maintained 'new cannery machines' and automatic fruit and vegetable slicers (p. 72). Indeed, one of the main reasons for seeing Velutha as a pivotal character in the political debate about 'who counts' in Kerala and the world that *The God of Small Things* stages is that he reveals an enormous ability to create culture and society for everyone around him. He has an enormous imaginative and cognitive life of experiences that the coloniality of power in Kerala has denied him as a Paravan.

While there are several tragic deaths in *The God of Small Things* — the novel opens with the memories of the Mol family grieving around the drowned Anglo-Indian Sophie Mol's coffin, and Ammu dies alone in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey at the viable and die-able age of 31, the novel revolves around the brutal death of Velutha and the postcolonial nation's inability to count him as one of its own.<sup>18</sup> After the forbidden sexual encounter between Ammu and Velutha is uncovered by the family, Baby Kochamma makes a complaint to the local police on false charges, and with the approval of the local Marxist party hegemony, Velutha is hunted down, beaten, and tortured to death at the police station: 'his skull was fractured in

three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth. . . . Four of his ribs were splintered . . . The blood on his breath bright red. Fresh. Frothy' (p. 294).

*The God of Small Things* circles around Velutha's, Sophie Mol's, and Ammu's death and the subsequent 'social deaths'<sup>19</sup> of Rahel and Estha. After the twins are forced by Baby Kochamma to 'save' Ammu's sexual and caste reputation by condemning Velutha to false charges of kidnapping and child abuse, Roy shows how dominance (without hegemony) intrudes into the smallest spaces in Kerala. What Rahel and Estha experience, Roy writes, was 'a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions . . . of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly . . . If [the police] hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature — had been severed long ago. [T]he posse of Touchable Policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria' (p. 293, my emphasis).

While Rahel and Estha almost never recover from these deaths, Velutha's life and brutal death force them to tamper with the inchoencies of 'kinship' and biology. Kinship is therefore not just a situation Rahel and Estha, Ammu and Velutha find themselves in, but a set of practices in postcolonial Kerala that are, as Roy suggests, controlled, performed, ritualized, and monopolized by those in power. Kinship trouble, we might say, is what Roy seeks to deinstitution in *The God of Small Things*.

In political and psychoanalytic terms, *The God of Small Things* traces Estha and Rahel's struggles to 'work through'<sup>20</sup> the implications of their complex cathectic relations with postcolonial Kerala and the Ayemenem House. Estha never fully recovers. He stops talking altogether. Occupying as little space as possible in Kerala, he walks 'along the banks of the river that smelled like shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans' (p. 14). Rahel, too, returns from a self-imposed diaspora of sorts in the United States, where she suffers a bad marriage in Boston, divorces, and labors in a New York City ethnic restaurant. When she learns that Estha has returned to Ayemenem (they have been apart for 25 years, since December 1969), she comes home.

If for Rahel surviving the brutal Kerala past is partly predicated on her identity of diaspora, her attempt to form a coherent present also involves a transgressive 'acting out' with her twin brother Estha. The adult twins do so by making the love laws and its rules incoherent. Interestingly, Roy can not directly represent Rahel and Estha's sexual transgression. There was, after all, Roy explains 'very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened' to

Rahel and Estha. 'Nothing that . . . would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings' (p. 310). What is only narratable is that Estha and Rahel had held each other closely, long after making love, and that 'that night was not happiness, but hideous grief' (p. 311).

Hideous grieving, intimate loving, working through the coloniality of melancholia — all these idioms are woven together in *The God of Small Things* through Rahel and Estha, suggesting the complexity involved of coming to know oneself and expanding one's capacity to experience with others. The figures of Rahel and Estha may well compel a reading that tampers with the normative spheres of kinship, bloodlines that sustain and monopolize the society and the nation by exposing the socially contingent character of kinship.<sup>21</sup>

Roy ends her postcolonial novel by suggesting how much theoretical and historical knowledge is involved in Ammu, Estha, and Rahel's learning to experience in Kerala. Their changing relationship with Velutha is based on an understanding of the brutality of caste, the love laws, and of the necessity and urgency to deinstitutionalize them. *The God of Small Things* is one of the most intriguing of postcolonial texts precisely because of the ways it indicates the extent to which subaltern identity and experience depends upon a minor (or small) historiography. We cannot claim a political identification, Roy suggests, until we have reconstituted our small collective identities and reexamine who counts in our cultures and societies.

In conclusion, I suggested that *pensamiento fronterizo* is linked to a realist view of US minoritized studies. I suggested further that the recent directions in minoritized studies — subaltern studies, the coloniality of power, and postpositivist realist studies — could be taken as the most significant movements in US postcolonial studies rather than as blueprints or master discourses to be imposed worldwide. Thus, *pensamiento fronterizo* in minoritized studies demands a different conceptualization of the self, of power, and of cultural citizenship. I have also assumed a framework in which the minoritized and subalternized designs in Anzaldúa, Martinez, and Roy's narratives are linked to different stages of the modern world-system: the coloniality of power from the Renaissance to the present in Anzaldúa and Martinez's narratives, and the love laws and the British imperial difference in Roy's novel. All three minoritized designs in these Chicano/a and South Asian works argue for a border and diasporic thinking as a necessary epistemology upon which a diversalist knowledge can be articulated in a transmodernist world governed by global capitalism and new forms of coloniality. Finally, my essay is an argument for a critical and comparative cosmopolitanism from below; at the same time I see in Anzaldúa, Martinez, and Roy's imaginative writings a plea for a new politics of diversity — one that conceives border and diasporic thinking as a critical project.

## Notes

- 1 The concept of the coloniality of power was theorized by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano. He argues that modern regimes of power are characterized by what he terms 'coloniality', which, as distinct from colonialism, is not simply defined by a formal redomination between empire and colony but primarily defined by global and national/cultural hierarchies (gendered, racialized, and sexualized) that are articulated differentially in time and space. See Quijano's (1992, 2000). See also Mignolo (2000), Lao-Montes (2001), and Grosfoguel (2002).
- 2 For a discussion of the twinned logics of US empire (as a spatial territory) and as the cultures of US new imperialism (as a deterritorialized logic of capitalism), see Harvey (2003).
- 3 See Althusser (1971) and Butler (1997).
- 4 See *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1990).
- 5 Deleuze & Guattari (1986).
- 6 See my 'Foreword' (2001), (2000a and b, 1996).
- 7 The postpositivist realism the *Reclaiming Identity* scholars defend emerges from within the philosophy of science, and is informed by the work of Charles Sanders Pierce, W.V.O. Quine, and Hilary Putnam, among others. I have profited from Putnam's autobiographical essay on the philosophy of science entitled 'A Half Century of Philosophy, Viewed From Within' (1997).
- 8 Mohanty hypothesizes in *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*: 'instead of conceiving identities as self-evidently based on the authentic experiences of members of a cultural or social group . . . , or as all equally unreal to the extent that they lay any claim to the real experiences of real people because experience is a radically mystifying term . . . , we need to explore the possibility of a theoretical understanding of social and cultural identity in terms of objective social location. To do so, we need a cognitivist conception of experience . . .' (1997, p. 216).
- 9 Brown (1995).
- 10 As I have suggested above, the coloniality of power functions to organize cross-genealogical dialogues and theoretical developments around issues central to the futures of minority studies: identity, subjectification, power regimes, epistemology, and transformative politics. Among the scholars engaged in those dialogues are Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Agustín Lao-Montes, Ramón Grosfoguel, Enrique Dussel, Catherine Walsh, and Freya Schiwy.
- 11 For far-reaching studies of the emerging problems in the intellectual and institutional organization of academic thinking, see Wallerstein *et al.* (1996) and Mignolo (2000). While the Wallersteinian Gulbenkian Commission's report is a highly analytical narrative of the social sciences over the past 100 years, and gracefully uses world system theory, chaos and dynamical complexity theory, contingent universalism, and a timely call for ethnoracial

and gender diversity in the academy to overturn Max Weber's worn out call for a 'disenchantment with the world', Mignolo's study of the historical humanities in the modern world colonial system can be read as an exemplary corrective to the Gulbenkian Commission's call for universalizing the social sciences. Mignolo argues that the Gulbenkian Commission's position on universalism ends up subalternizing others. Briefly, the issue for Mignolo is not how to universalize the social sciences or the historical humanities, but how to better locate the 'colonial difference' embedded in our academic cultures of scholarship. Mignolo insists that we need to think in terms of local US Latino/a and global border knowledge (*gnosis*) rather than in terms of the disciplines.

- 12 For an understanding of how nineteenth-century America was obsessed about vernacular varieties of English, see Jones (1999).
- 13 *Nepantla* is a word used by a Nahuatl-speaking people in the sixteenth century to define their own socio-cultural situation in the face of the Spanish conquest. As Walter Mignolo suggests, the word, *nepantla*, was recorded by Diego Durán, a Dominican missionary who was writing an ethnographic history of the Nahuatl speakers from the Valley of Mexico. When Durán asked one of his informants what he thought about the difficult situation that had been created for them by the Spanish invasion, the informant is reported to have responded 'estamos nepantla', ('we are Nepantla'), that is, 'we are in-between'. Personal correspondence with the author, 15 January 1998. My emphasis on *nepantla* throughout the essay is meant to function as a reminder of the 'colonial difference' implicit in US Latino/a Studies, a translational and transnational memory that all cultural difference has to be seen in the context of power and of the relations of subalternity and domination.
- 14 Gloria Anzaldúa writes in 'Border Arte: Nepantla, El lugar de la Frontera', that border art 'depicts both the soul of the artist and the soul of the pueblo. It deals with who tells the stories and what stories and histories are told. I call this form of visual narrative *autohistorias*. This form goes beyond the traditional self-portrait or autobiography, in telling the writer/artist's personal story, it also includes the artist's cultural history' (p. 113). In a conversation with me at the University of California, Santa Cruz, on 17 October 1990, Anzaldúa described the form of *Borderlands/La Frontera* with the homegrown neologism, *autohistoriteoría*.
- 15 Anzaldúa's imaginative work has had the great fortune of having been treated by superb feminist and postcolonial critics. In addition to Mignolo, Saldívar-Hull, Sandoval, Yarbrow-Bejarano, and Chabram-Dernesesian's work, readers can track an emerging debate in Chicana/o Studies between psychoanalytic and deconstructive work such as Norma Alarcón's and post-postivist realist work such as Paula Moya's. For Alarcón, Anzaldúa's 'lesbo-erotic' text not only 'recodifies the multiple names of Woman' and recuperates 'a new mestiza consciousness', but also resituates Coatlicue through the author's own 'nonconscious memory' (p. 50). Briefly, for Alarcón, Anzaldúa



represents 'the non-(pre)-oedipal mother' in *Borderlands/La Frontera* and in the process 'gives birth to herself as inscriber/speaker of/for mestiza consciousness' (p. 50). More recently, Paula Moya in *Learning from Experience*, has responded to Alarcón's and Chela Sandoval's reading of Anzaldúa by suggesting that in Alarcón's and Sandoval's proto-poststructuralist approaches to Chicana feminism in general and Anzaldúa's work in particular, they have 'run the risk of theorizing . . . identity in terms of ambiguity and fragmentation so that the 'Chicana' becomes, in effect, a figure for marginality and contradiction in the postmodern world. I would argue that the term 'Chicana' should not denote a principle of abstract oppositionality' (p. 129). In contradistinction to Alarcón's and Sandoval's readings, Moya calls for a post-positivist realist approach to Anzaldúa's work based on issues of identity and experience. Thus envisaged, Anzaldúa's new mestiza consciousness for Moya can be interpreted as a form of 'epistemic privilege', that is, 'a special advantage with respect to possessing or acquiring knowledge about how fundamental aspects of our society . . . operate to sustain matrices of power' (p. 188, fn. 36). While this is not the place to respond to this debate in Chicano/a Studies, I would like to note that Anzaldúa's work engages us with another 'take' on the 'post', that is, what we might call, the 'post-human'. Throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa asks an urgent question: how do we go about breaking down the barriers we pose between the human and the animal? In contradistinction to Weber and Descartes, Anzaldúa calls for a 'reenchantment with the world'. Specifically, her 'alien' allegory builds on passages such as the following one in her *autohistoriateoría*: 'I tremble before the animal, the alien, sub-or suprahuman, the one that has something in common with the wind and the trees . . . , that possesses a demon determination and ruthlessness *beyond the human*' (p. 72, my emphasis).

- 16 I would like to thank my Berkeley colleague, Gautam Premnath for allowing me to read his superb dissertation entitled 'Arguments with Nationalism in the Fiction of the Indian Diaspora', which he completed at Brown University in 2003. I am especially indebted to Premnath's powerful suggestion that Arhundhati Roy politically declares herself and her characters to be 'mobile republics' in order to get at the fundamental failure of the Indian republic to come into its own. I read Premnath's work after I had completed the writing of this last section of the essay, and after I had formulated my arguments that Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* fundamentally critiques postcolonial coloniality and nationalism through her dystopian deconstruction of kinship in Kerala and alternatively uses the erotic as a utopian form of political and cultural critique.
- 17 Here in this last section, it should become clear that I am in substantial agreement with Satya P. Mohanty that our identities are not mere social constructions and hence 'spurious', nor fixed unchanging essences in a brutalizing world. I agree, further, with Mohanty that 'we have the capacity to examine our social identities, considering them in light of our best

- understanding of other social facts and our other social relationships' (1997, p. 201). My reading of Roy's *The God of Small Things* is indebted to what I take to be Mohanty's significant reformulation of experience and identity dispersed throughout his *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* (1997).
- 18 I read Roy's critique of the bourgeois nation in *The God of Small Things* as echoing Ranajit Guha's description of the South Asian Subaltern Group's project. In his essay, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India' (1988), Guha defines the problematic of their project as 'the study of [the] historical failure of the nation to come into its own, a failure due to the inadequacy of the bourgeoisie as well as of the working class to lead it to a decisive victory over colonialism and a bourgeois-democratic revolution of either the classic nineteenth-century type under the hegemony of the bourgeoisie or a more modern type under the hegemony of workers and peasants, that is a "new democracy"', p. 43.
  - 19 I refer, of course, to the term Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) gives to the status of being a living being radically deprived of all rights.
  - 20 See Dominick LaCapra's 'Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historians' Debate' (1992).
  - 21 My reading of kinship and positionality has profited from Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000).

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