

Arching Interstice and, Intersections of Vulnerability

Bio-position:

I am sitting in the back alley of my family's home in Mt. Airy, Philadelphia. The sound of fiddle music is coming from the open garage of the family across the street. Along the alley are gardens that people have grown themselves or for one another. My mother tends the one behind our house and the one next to our house. My father cuts wood in the garage. My mother grows white marigolds from seeds that her grandmother grew. My father asks my mother to plant peppers like the ones his uncle did, to remind him of Italy. These are the ways that we are practicing a homemaking. With ourselves and with our community. Here I am white, a woman, a girl, a daughter, a sister, a neighbor, an extra set of hands.

At the beginning of chapter two in *Borderlands / La Frontera* Gloria Anzaldúa brings us to a vision of her childhood, the home she occupied, and the roles she was being asked to play that she was certain were not right for her. Roles of a cultural house that said: *here, the options are clear, you may be a mother, a slut, or a nun*. That, "If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries she is a good woman" (*Borderlands* p. 39). Three options of relationship that once chosen, defined the lives lived by those roles in their implicit relation to men. Relationships which dictated that the only way a woman might be protected is if she was under the power of men, and the only way she might profit is in service of them. A Mother's value was in their ability to provide offspring to a man (singular), sex workers in using their womaness as a tool in relation to male clientel, and nuns in the devotion of their life to the ultimate man, 'the Father.' When I read through Anzaldúa, and think of my own critiques of colonial-catholic conceptions of 'right' male-female relationship, I take a closer look at what those roles mean, and how they treat people in difference. "Culture, (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles" (p. 39). Gloria posits that the reason for these rigid cultural roles for women are because of their

biological closeness to a carnal natural. A divine and un-divine strangeness that smells of magic and the supernatural. "Woman is the stranger, the other" (p.35). I wonder if she is asking us to look towards that power here, in relation to the power that is and has been wielded over women for so long. That perhaps we can use this strangeness to say *we possess something special, something magic, something that cannot be had*. And yet she also says that in queerness she exists in both genders at once. "But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female" (p. 41). And that this too is a type of otherness magic, intrinsic perhaps, or perhaps arising from the outcastedness, from being pushed away in fear by the cultural norms. I am wondering where and how she finds her womaness in her queerness? And if to be both ever cancels one out, or if it is always wholly two or more than two? I love when she says that queerness "is a path of knowledge—one of knowing (and of learning) the history of the oppression of our *raza*. It is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality" (p. 41). What I think she is saying, or what she is saying to my ears this moment, is that the practice of queerness, the insistence of resisting the valued and known roles existent because of colonialism and catholicism, the persistence that it takes to make a way through in the unknown and not allowed, produces a new knowledge. A knowledge which reveals by the nature of its precarity the history of the oppression of what that difference is. A knowledge that can't be known until someone or some people believe in what they feel and are enough to risk rejection from the home, discomfort in the consequences, and the possibilities of harm.

But this contrasts for me with Kimberly Crenshaw's laying out of (borrowing a phrase from Frank B. Wilderson III) the "structural vulnerability" of Black people and specifically Black women (Afro-pessimism, p. 18). Anzaldúa obviously didn't choose to be born a woman or Chicana, nor are the particular discriminations in her life her own doing, but she did choose to leave her home. She made the decision to go against the norms despite their consequences. Whereas black women are treated in distinct or divergent injustice without any provocation other than being born into a society which can place them legally outside of the known lanes of discrimination. Now this may apply to Anzaldúa in a different intersection as well, but there is a difference in history between the oppression of Chicanas as a people and the oppression of Black people. I am thinking about when Frank B. Wilderson writes, speaking

specifically about Black people in America: “Whether he or she receives that violence or not, he or she exists in a state of structural or open vulnerability. This vulnerability is not contingent upon his or her transgressing some type of law, as in going on strike with the worker” (Afro-pessimism p. 18). And that that takes me to Crenshaw speaking about the DeGraffenried case: “The court's refusal in DeGraffenried to acknowledge that Black women encounter combined race and sex discrimination implies that the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women's and Black men's experiences. Under this view, Black women are protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with those of either of the two groups. Where their experiences are distinct, Black women can expect little protection as long as approaches, such as that in DeGraffenried, which completely obscure problems of intersectionality prevail” (Crenshaw, p. 143). In the case of DeGraffenried, they are in a way placed in a fourth quadrant of being in the eyes of the law which is somehow not given the consideration of Blackness or womaness because they are both.

I wonder how this might relate to Anzaldúa's ideas of a gender queer *bothness* and a racial *mestizaje*. Is being of two or more races, and two or more genders an intersection? Certainly it is a different intersection than that which Black women exist in, and a different kind of intersection as well. Where Black women exist in the interstice of Blackness and womaness, Chicanas exist perhaps in the meeting of three or more. (And these are all questions.) The possible meeting of male and female, mexican, white, spanish, indigenous? Which unilluminated intersection might this put them in? And how many more unilluminated intersections are there? And even simplifying Black women's experience into terms of Blackness and womaness is not illuminating enough. And how can we take all of these intersections into account via the small, slow, and unjustly sloped scope of the law? And bringing Wilderson's phrase into a different context, could we consider intersectionality and its relation to legality, in terms of the distinct and specific structural vulnerabilities and immunities that individuals and collectives experience in relation to dominant/dominating society?

I'm left holding thoughts of Anzaldúa and DeGraffenreid's resistances. Thinking in terms that I found in Jack Halberstam's introduction to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons*:

"The path to the wild beyond is paved with refusal. In *The Undercommons* if we begin anywhere, we begin with the right to refuse what has been refused to you. Citing Gayatri Spivak, Moten and Harney call this refusal the "first right" and it is a game-changing kind of refusal in that it signals the refusal of the choices as offered." (*Undercommons*, p. 8).

Works Cited:

1. Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera*.
2. Crenshaw, Kimberly. *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*.
3. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation*. Interviewed by C.S. Soong in *Afro-pessimism*. 2015
4. Halberstam, Jack. *The Undercommons : Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. 2013