

The Poetic Politics of Chicana & Black Women's Poetry

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Vol. 2(1), 2017

Article Title: The Poetic Politics of Chicana & Black Women's Poetry

DOI: 10.21081/AX0105

ISSN: 2381-800X

Key Words: Chicana feminism, Black feminism, feminism, poetry, race, gender/women's studies

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Abstract

Using feminist theoretical framework that understands power is vested in language, this analysis focuses on the ways in which poetry has helped to combat the linguistic terrorism, cultural restraints, racism, sexism, classism, and various other oppressions that seek to silence Black and Chicana feminist movements and control women's existence in the United States. This comparison analyzes how the creation, performance, and reading/sharing of poetry is employed as a carrier of language, experience, knowledge, and history to resist internal and external cultural oppressions by dominant groups in the United States.

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*"For women, then, poetry is not a luxury.
It is a vital necessity of our existence."**

Poetry serves in recognizing multidimensional identities as political entities in political worlds. The poetic process rejects the separation of art and politics, and instead acknowledges creativity and spirituality as vital components of holistic knowledge and consciousness to facilitate discussion of power, privilege, and oppression within and outside of feminist movements. As Audre Lorde writes, it is vital to women's existence. However, although Chicana and Black women have been involved in feminist movements for centuries, their acceptance and inclusion in these movements has often been barred by racism and classism inherent in White mainstream feminism. Using Chicana and Black feminist theoretical framework from Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde that understands power is vested in language, this analysis focuses on the ways in which poetry has helped to combat the linguistic terrorism, cultural restraints, racism, sexism, classism, and various other oppressions that

seek to silence Black and Chicana feminist movements and control women's existences in the United States. This comparison analyzes how the creation, performance, and reading/sharing of poetry is employed as a carrier of language, experience, knowledge, and history to resist internal and external cultural oppressions by dominant groups in the United States.

Focusing specifically on Chicana and Black women's writing allows the term "feminist" to be critically examined. Feminist history is not synonymous with women's history. Feminist movements have a significant role in defining women's rights, status, and perception in broader society and culture. Nevertheless, women of color often reject the label "feminist" because of the racist, classist connotations it carries. Therefore, rather than only focusing on feminist poetry, this analysis examines poetry written by Chicana and Black women who may or may not claim the "feminist" title. "Third-wave feminism" is often thought of as the birthplace of intersectionality and the emergence of women of color into feminist movements. However, both Black and Chicana

feminist movements must *not* be thought of as reactions to, or branches of, mainstream White feminism. Women of color have been involved with resistance movements in the United States for generations. It is not by White acceptance or recognition that the actions and accomplishments of women of color should be recognized.

By simply occupying labels of non-White and non-male, women of color face oppression from the dominant culture in the United States within social, economic, and political opportunities, respects, and institutions. Women of color are alienated by being in both the category of “woman” and “person of color.” Nevertheless, “women” cannot be carelessly lumped into a single unified class of people based solely on gender; hierarchies of oppression connected to sexuality, race, and class impact the ways in which different women experience patriarchal violence at the hands of men (and White women, who hold racial privilege). Although the existence of patriarchal violence upon women is universal, it is not experienced in the same way universally. Additionally, “people of color” is not a category that can be conceptualized as any non-White person who experiences oppression in the United States. Historical institutions of colonialism, slavery, and racism in the United States have created stereotypes and perceptions of different racial groups that influence the ways in which different races are treated. Thus, while Chicana women and Black women are both women of color who experience oppression in the United States, it is not to be suggested that these groups of women do not have unique histories and perspectives. Examining the nuances between the manifestations of oppression upon different groups of women from both the dominant culture (i.e., White male patriarchal culture) and within marginalized groups (i.e., *machismo*) is necessary for the study of both Black and Chicana women’s resistance through poetry.

“Chicana” refers to women of Mexican descent. It is different from the terms “Hispanic” or “Latina,” which refer to Spanish-speaking peoples and persons from Latin America, respectively. “Chicana” is a term that highlights the diversity of Mexican heritage, including indigenous Americans, Spanish colonizers, and *mestizo* populations (Nieto, 1997). Chicanas’ close ties to Mexico alienate them from hegemonic culture in the United States due to the language difference between English and Spanish as well as the rhetoric that portrays Mexican immigrants as “illegal” “aliens.” Hence, Chicana women’s lived experiences in the United States

are different from Black women’s experiences in the United States, who face specific historical legacies of slavery and segregation. Just as Chicana, Latina, and Hispanic are not synonymous, “Black” is not a single, defined group of people. For the purposes of this analysis, “Black” is used as a term to describe anyone who identifies themselves as Black, and experiences prejudice due to the color of their skin.

My use of the word “poetry” draws from black feminist poet Audre Lorde’s theoretical framework that encompasses both physically written and spoken poetry as well as the poetic spirit and poetic *processes* of writing, creating, performing, and reading poetry (Lorde, 1984). With this understanding, poetry is an act of power, creation, and knowledge pulled from lived experience—or theory in the flesh (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). Using this critical framework, Anzaldúa’s concept of *conocimiento* questions conventional knowledge’s current categories, classifications, and contents, advocating for the restructuring of knowledge through non-traditional spiritual and creative processes such as poetry (Anzaldúa, 2002). Poetry validates personal experience as legitimate knowledge, and simultaneously produces new knowledge in individuals through consciousness raising (Moraga, 2015). In both Chicana and Black women’s feminist movements, consciousness raising took place largely through the writing, reading, and performing of poetry. Through shared community and validation of their respective identities and experiences, Black and Chicana women were able to deconstruct dichotomies between personal lives and political issues, emotions and intellectual thought, and between abstract feminist theory and applicable feminist practice.

Through reframing hegemonic conceptions of knowledge, women’s poetry stimulated and advanced social justice work by demanding the presence and need for women’s perspectives, histories, and thoughts to be part of the larger discourse and mainstream knowledge. Through this process, language can be recognized as action. New understandings of knowledge reject the idea that language only serves to inspire or promote action, rather than the act of writing being revolutionary in itself. To write with and from perspectives that are not male, white, heterosexual, or middle-class is to break systemic oppression and silence by claiming an active voice and meaningful presence in hegemonic society (Lorde, 1984). Through the poetry produced in both Black and Chicana feminist movements, these women bring their

spiritual strength and resilience to life through celebrating language, history, and self-worth.

Chicana feminism is rooted in the political consciousness, activism, and resistance of the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 70s, but sought to widen political and social consciousness to include the experiences of women through examining intersections of race, class, and gender (Córdova, 1994; Nieto, 1997). In doing this work, Chicanas face resistance from both dominant, White Anglo culture as well as alienation and accusations of undermining solidarity from within Chicano communities (Córdova, 1994). Facing oppression from these various fronts, the Chicana identity is grounded in what Anzaldúa names “border culture” (Anzaldúa, 1987). Both physical and psychological, borderland cultures consist of the tensions, collisions, and relations between cultural, linguistic, or various “othering” factors such as sexuality, gender, or class that create split-consciousness for individuals in between groups in a transitional *nepantla* state of being/bridging communities and multidimensional identities (Anzaldúa, 2002). A “borderland” split of consciousness is not unique to Chicana women, however. Black women’s identities and relations to themselves, their communities, and to dominant White culture have been formed by living in a racist White society that systemically denies Black women of their histories and voices. Additionally, the patriarchal structure within Black communities denies Black women of their gender identity in the name of anti-racist solidarity (hooks, 2015). The fragmentation of the mind and consciousness that results from having to constantly deny aspects of one’s identity results in split consciousness. Although painful, this split is not necessarily destructive; the liminality of living in and between communities or aspects of one’s identity allows for a deeper understanding of consciousness to draw on inner strength and creativity to enact “internal shifts and external changes” (Anzaldúa, 2002).

Chicana poetry is born of the struggles of living in and among physical and psychological borderlands. The physical border between Mexico and the United States is founded upon the seizure of Mexican land through White, capitalist exploitation; linguistic barriers between English, Spanish, and Indigenous languages become borderlands founded on cultural difference and racism through linguistic terrorism; and legacies of the Spanish Conquest create psychological borderlands by the systematic establishment of racialized power and

social hierarchies that devalue Chicana existence (Anzaldúa, 1987). Themes of emphasizing and celebrating ancestry and heritage as well as the promotion of self-worth and agency are prevalent within Chicana poetry, operating to give name to their various oppressions and effectively carve space for the Chicana perspective in mainstream literature and discourse. Black feminist poetry does many of the same things; however, Black women’s poetry is unique to Black women’s experiences, cultures, and histories. Legacies of institutionalized slavery, racism, and the systematic commodification of black women’s bodies differ from the ways in which the Spanish Conquest and institutionalized racism affect Chicana communities (hooks, 2015). Themes of tradition and strength inherited from foremothers and shared among sisters are prevalent themes in both Chicana and Black feminist poetry, as well as the declaration of agency over the self by redefining the value of “dark” bodies that have been hypersexualized, demonized, and degraded by White society.

Celebration of ancestry and heritage within Chicana poetry is largely tied to physical land and nature as well as the knowledge, strength, resilience, and the spirituality of Chicanos/Chicanas, particularly through maternal lineage and the passing of language and culture through mothers and grandmothers. Black and Chicana poets, by virtue of their intersectional identities, do not or cannot separate political issues from the realm and experiences of personal life (Moraga, 2015). Chicana poets specifically craft their diverse linguistic backgrounds to work towards fighting for social justice through the lyrics of their poems (Herrera-Sobek & Viramontes, 1996). The combined use of Spanish, English, and sometimes Nahuatl in Chicana poetry is used to explore and engage the extent of Chicana identity and history. Anzaldúa does this through her writing and poetry:

This land was Mexican once,
was Indian always
and is.
And will be again.

*Yo soy un Puente tendido
del mundo gabacho al del mojado,
lo pasado me estirá pa' trás
y lo presente pa' 'delante.
Que la Virgen de Guadalupe me cuide
Ay ay ay, soy Mexicana de este lado.*¹

The combination of Spanish and English visually and textually provides the division between the United States and Mexican border. Additionally, Anzaldúa takes a political stance by pulling from her linguistic heritage—she employs the Spanish language without translation or explanation. The poem challenges dominant English-speaking culture in the United States and ties her to the land that was taken from her ancestors (Herrera-Sobek & Viramontes, 1996).

Black women's language possesses the same power to challenge dominant, White English and cultural practices (Combahee River Collective, 2014). The notion of song (lyric and poetry) that is closely tied to Black women's spirituality and resistance has been partially shaped by slavery and the fact that historically, Black women were not allowed to read or write (Walker, 1994). Thus, poetry became a vital necessity of Black women's existence; using language to define, name, and speak for themselves, Black women's resistance manifested itself through lyric, song, and poetry to develop a unique Black voice to reclaim the language which had been instrumental in silencing them (Lorde, 1987). Black feminist poet Ntozake Shange rejects using "correct" English and instead writes in a language that mirrors spoken word. Shange compares the manipulation and creation of a new English language to a new identity for Black women—emerging with crowns on their heads and acknowledging ancestors who "didn't make it," but displaying optimism for the future:

rappin' a English we make up as we go along
turnin' nouns into verbs braids into crowns
and always fetchin' dreams from a horizon
strewn with bones and flesh of those of us
who didn't make it whose smiles and deep
dark eyes help us to continue to see
there's so much life here.²

Reclaiming language goes hand in hand with reclaiming land; both Black and Chicana histories have been colonized by dominant White erasure, and the physical land stolen or lost from these communities of women through the Spanish Conquest and slavery display the origin of the split in consciousness of Black and Chicana women.

The physical seizure, domination, or control of land and language by hegemonic White forces parallels the psychological colonization and silencing of Indigenous, Mexican, and Black women (Córdova, 1994).

Feminist poetry emphasizes that "to transform yourself, you need the help (the written or spoken word) of those who have crossed before you" (Anzaldúa, 2002, pp. 557). Ancestry goes beyond geographic space to encompass the knowledge, creativity, and work of women that is passed through generations of mothers, sisters, friends, and other women. Appreciating women as carriers of knowledge and culture solidifies women's presence and power in history and acknowledges the oppressions that enforced silence and struggle:

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color
of my mother speaking for her*

as it should be
dark women come to me
sitting in circles

I pass through their hands
the head of my mother
painted in clay colors

touching each carved feature
swollen eyes and mouth
they understand the explosion the splitting
open contained within the fixed expression

they cradle her silence
nodding to me³

Chicana feminist author Cherríe Moraga inherits the words unspoken by her mother contained in the knowledge of the head, which is painted in the "clay colors" of the earth to represent a connection to both maternal ancestry, indigenous ancestry, and a mother-earth figure. Moraga shares these knowledges with the circle of women she is surrounded by, encouraged to speak for her mother and herself. Similarly, Alice Walker explores Black ancestry and the importance of black foremother figures in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," discussing how the history of Black resistance (spiritual and physical) from her foremothers enabled her to find her "garden," (connecting to both the mother-earth as well as her female ancestors) as her place and voice in the contemporary Black feminist movement and society as a whole (Walker, 1994).

Black and Chicana feminist poetry movements sought to redefine what it meant to be not only Black and Chicana, but Black and Chicana *women*. In defining

their realities and experiences with their own language and definitions, the women of these movements rejected stereotypical narratives prescribed onto them by dominant society (Combahee River Collection, 2014; Córdova, 1994). Chicana poetry challenges the rhetoric and belief that framed the downfall of Chicano men as originating with the creation of *mestizo* people by women passively surrendering themselves and their people to their conquerors (Córdova, 1994). The idea of the passive Chicana woman is rejected, replaced by women reclaiming their sexual, political, and social agency over themselves as valuable members of their communities. Chicana poet Alma Villanueva discusses these themes in her poem “I Sing to Myself”:

I will swallow you whole and
accept and transform you
till you melt
in my mouth. (you/man only
bit the apple:
you must swallow
death—
I/woman give birth:
and this time to
myself).⁴

The woman in this poem is active and present. The allusion to the apple, from the biblical tree of knowledge, is only bitten by the man; the woman herself is holding the man in her mouth, ultimately, containing all knowledge. With this knowledge, the woman then gives birth—to herself, a new self. This new self and new life are produced from an old life of struggle and strife, yet “The new life brings a sense of hope and strength to the old life and makes an identification and linkage between the new and the old life . . . [Bringing] hope and optimism for a better future. Motherhood, then, is perceived as a creative process and equated with writing poetry, [and] being born again” (Herrera-Sobek & Viramontes, 1996). For Black women, cultural perceptions of motherhood were largely centered on the romanticization of Black women’s strength; as “mammies” and domestic matriarchal figures, the idea of a “strong, Black woman” permeated popular rhetoric (hooks, 2015). This became harmful in the development of the myth that Black women were already liberated, confusing liberation and being strong in the face of oppression with *overcoming* oppression (hooks, 2015). However, through Black femi-

nist movements, Black women redefined the meaning of their strength and reclaimed their active voice in existing beyond the definitions of their oppression by reclaiming ties to motherhood and being mothers of all life:

I was born in the congo
I walked to the fertile crescent and built
the sphinx
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star
that only glows every one hundred years falls
into the center giving divine perfect light
I am bad

I sat on the throne
drinking nectar with allah
I got hot and sent an ice age to europe
to cool my thirst
My oldest daughter is nefertiti
the tears from my birth pains
created the Nile
I am a beautiful woman.⁵

Author Nikki Giovanni ties Black women back to the beginning of history, and throughout the poem continues to place Black women in the place of historical events and figures; in doing this, Giovanni asserts Black women’s presence in their own terms, rather than dominant perceptions of Black women/people only existing in relation to colonialism or through relations with White history.

Black and Chicana women write, create, and live within intersectional identities which help define the social, political, and economic realities of living in the margins of hegemonic White culture. Yet although these external forces affect the realities of Black and Chicana women, they are not solely defined by their oppressions; Moraga writes that for women of color, “spirituality does not come from outside ourselves. It emerges when we listen to the ‘small still voice’ within us which can empower us to create actual change in the world” (Moraga, 2015, pp. 195). Thus, writing and creating poetry can be understood as spirituality, and spirituality can be understood to not be mutually exclusive with politics, intellect, or knowledge. Instead, spirituality becomes a revolutionary force for women along the path of *conocimiento*, finding and reclaiming their voice and knowledge to enact larger social change. Lorde writes that the “erotic,” deep, suppressed knowledge found in the life-

force of women and women's creativity is the power to become in touch with oneself and one's surroundings. This life force enables women to become less willing to accept powerlessness, resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, and self-denial (Lorde, 1984). Anzaldúa also writes on the spiritual power of poetry and women's knowledge, asserting that writing requires a complete trust and belief in herself, her ideas, and her spirit: "I cannot separate writing from any part of my life. It is all one" (Anzaldúa, 1987, pp. 73).

Dividing art, spirituality, intellect, politics, and personal life as completely separate spheres is to imagine the complex, fluid identities of Black and Chicana women as one-dimensional and stagnant. Black and Chicana identities are multidimensional and versatile—acting as bridges between cultural, linguistic, national, racial, and ethnic groups. However, Black women's identities, histories, and cultural practices and traditions are obviously different from Chicana experiences; it is not enough to merely group non-White women together as women "of color" and pretend that they experience gender, racial, linguistic, sexual, or classist oppressions in the same way. Although used for similar means and containing similar themes, Black and Chicana poetry and poetic processes are built upon different histories and cultures that make each movement unique to the creative and spiritual natures of Black and Chicana women. This attests to the adaptability of poetry as an accessible medium for *everyone* to develop feminist theory, raise consciousness, share experience, and resist oppressions by breaking silences. The breaking of women's silence is imperative for the future of Black and Chicana feminist movements as well as society as a whole, for "it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence" (Lorde, 1984, pp. 44). Through continuing dialogue and discussion among groups of women (and men), and by building on the traditions of women's poetry and resistance, fear, hatred, oppression, and injustice born and perpetuated by ignorance and silence can be deconstructed, dismantled, and reformed.

Notes

*From Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press.

1. Excerpt from Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

2. Excerpt from Shange, N. (1993) "People of Watts" in *Vibe Magazine* vol 1, no 3. Vibe Media Group.
3. Excerpt from Moraga, C. (2015) "For the Color of My Mother," In Moraga, C. & Anzaldúa, G. (Eds.). *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
4. Excerpt from Villanueva, A. (1977). "I Sing to Myself" in *Bloodroot*. Place of Herons Press.
5. Excerpt from Giovanni, N. (1972). "Ego Tripping (There May be a Reason Why)." In *My House*. Morrow.

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