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Wild Tongues in Education: Anzaldúa, Linguistic Oppression, and Power Culture

The current American education system often prides itself as being non-discriminatory toward students who identify with minority ethnic or social groups. Schools have increasingly embraced integration and diversity is most often celebrated rather than condemned in scholastic communities around the country. However, an evil practice lurks behind the façade of acceptance in the classroom: linguistic terrorism. Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana writer and theorist, first introduced this phrase in her piece “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” as she recounted the many attempts that were made to force her to speak either English or Spanish rather than the mixture of Chicano Spanish that she identified as her native tongue. Linguistic terrorism first began for Anzaldúa in the classroom at her elementary school and continued to negatively affect her schooling and her interactions with native English speakers throughout the rest of her life. But the linguistic oppression that Anzaldúa experienced was not an anomaly; many students who speak minority languages are subjects of linguistic terrorism in the classroom and are forced to conform to English as their primary form of communication. Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” condemns the still present oppression of minority languages in the classroom and attributes this oppression to the English power culture perpetuated in the United States.

To fully understand the linguistic terrorism that Anzaldúa was a victim of throughout her life, it is imperative to first understand Anzaldúa’s experiences as a student in the American education system. Anzaldúa was born in 1942 on a ranch settlement in southern Texas when her

mother was only 16 years old. Neither of her parents graduated from high school and neither of them encouraged their daughters to make education a priority, but this did not hinder Anzaldúa from earning her B.A. at Pan American University and her M.A. in English and Education at the University of Texas in 1972 (Torres). Since Anzaldúa continually pursued something that her mother and other family members often viewed as “laziness” due to the absence of physical labor involved, Anzaldúa’s relationships with members of her family were often tense and hostile (Torres). Anzaldúa also experienced her fair share of opposition from people in the workplace. When she asked permission as a professor at the University of Texas to teach pieces of Spanish and Chicano literature that were considered outside the Anglo-American canon, she was promptly denied and encouraged to stick to the provided list of essential literature (Torres). Frustrated by this experience and many others, Anzaldúa eventually went on to earn her PhD at the University of California Santa Cruz and became a distinguished professor and expert of feminist literature, Chicano literature, and Chicana studies (Torres).

However, Anzaldúa continued to be frustrated in her educational goals as a teacher by some of the Caucasian students in her classroom. In her courses on the studies of colored women and the oppression that they experienced, Anzaldúa taught in a way that gave a special voice to her colored students. Anzaldúa stated that her goal was for “the context to be theirs” and she desired “to hear from colored women first, men of color second...and lastly...from white people” (Torres 11). Unfortunately, the Caucasian students in her classroom were often disrespectful of Anzaldúa’s colored students and continually tried to press their views rather than allowing Anzaldúa to direct the class as she saw fit. Anzaldúa described the behavior of these white students as angry and domineering, people who continually tried to press their views over

the views of people of color, a pattern which disturbingly reminded Anzaldúa of her oppressive schooling experiences.

As is evidenced in Anzaldúa's experiences as a student and an educator, border studies did not gain a reputable identity until the 1990's (Alemán 399). Anzaldúa was a critical figure in validating the study of marginalized ethnic groups and encouraging people from minority identities and affiliations to participate in the conversation of contemporary American literature. Anzaldúa was shocked by the "sanitized" version of American literature that only included novels such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and it was not until later in the 20th century that including the Hispanic and Chicano perspectives in contemporary American Literature was no longer viewed as "barbaric" (Alemán).

Linguistic oppression in the classroom is a direct side effect of general minority oppression, which was particularly true in Anzaldúa's native state of Texas. In 1945 just after Anzaldúa was born, a Mexican American by the name of Macario Garcia, a decorated war veteran who had fought in WWII, was refused service at the Oasis Café in Richmond, Texas (Olivas). Although Garcia claimed that he merely protested this denial of service in a non-violent way, he was charged with aggravated assault. Furthermore, the employees involved claimed to have denied him service because he was drunk, not because of his race (Olivas). Soon after the Macario incident, Bruno Garcia, another Mexican American veteran, was refused service at the same Oasis Café (Olivas). When compared side by side with the first case, the two were almost identical in nature and the county chose to recede the charges brought against both of these Mexican American men (Olivas). Another more blatantly racist incident occurred in the case of Private Felix Longoria, a native Texan who died in combat in the Philippines and who was denied a proper funeral by the Anglo-run cemetery and was buried in the "Mexican only"

section “separated from the Anglo cemetery by strung barbed wire” (Olivas 6). Furthermore, Texas also upheld a series of discriminatory Jim Crowe Texas laws defined as “a caste system almost organic in its near-total control of Mexican American life and opportunity in post-WWII times” (Olivas 7). Thus it is evident that Anzaldúa was surrounded by countless manifestations of discrimination against minority populations in her lifetime, particularly during her childhood in the state of Texas.

While these more obvious forms of oppression may not come as a surprise, the linguistic oppression that has occurred and continues to occur in American classrooms can be viewed as potentially even more disturbing and harmful. A recent study conducted in 2010 was made of Oaxacan students who immigrated to the United States from Mexico and were integrated into Plazita High School located in Mora City for a 6-month period (Barillas-Chón). Oaxacan people often feel marginalized even in their home country of Mexico. Since many of the Oaxacan people are indigenous, about 35% speak an indigenous language as their primary language rather than Spanish (Barillas-Chón). Overall, the experiences of these students at Plazita High School were extremely negative and they felt particularly unwelcome at the high school in spite of its seemingly welcoming practices. As the school strove to provide areas of inclusion where the Oaxacan students would feel safe and have a sense of belonging, the same spaces also served to isolate these students from mainstream school cultures (Barillas-Chón). Unfortunately, the unintended result of these spaces was the denial of “opportunities for establishing and creating social and cultural capital,” which are essential factors for the belonging and equal treatment of perceived outsiders into any particular culture (Barillas-Chón 317). Not surprisingly, the main source of unwelcome behavior directed at the Oaxacan students came from other high school students, Spanish speakers and English speakers alike. These students were perceived as not

being able to speak Spanish or English very well and were repeatedly put down by their peers as a result of these perceived linguistic deficits (Barillas-Chón). Several of these students were able to speak both English and Spanish very well, but once their nationality and ethnic affiliation came to light people often assumed that they possessed certain linguistic deficits. Even though the teachers did their best to make the Oaxacan students feel welcome, the students repeatedly labeled them as linguistically inferior and refused to acknowledge the validity of their indigenous languages (Barillas-Chón).

One of the most common legal instruments for linguistic oppression in the United States is known by the education system and the general public as the English Only movement. Essentially, the movement claims that its master goal is to decree English as the official language of the United States of America. While this movement appears harmless at the outset, the cause for concern is the fact that supporters of the English Only movement are also supporters of many anti-immigration organizations including Americans for Border Control, Californians for Population Stabilization, and the Federation for American Immigration Reform (Pandilla 121). Many proponents of English Only fear that if no official language is declared, other minority languages will overrun English and these other languages will come to dominate public services, legal discourses, and education, a phenomenon that can be observed with the French language in Quebec, Canada (Pandilla 121). However, studies have shown that the majority of immigrants recognize the need to become proficient in English and that 75% of Hispanics, the most dominant minority group in the United States, use English regularly throughout the day (Pandilla 121).

The English Only movement has reared its ugly head in classrooms across the United States by punishing immigrant students for speaking their native language at any time in the classroom, something that Anzaldúa experienced as a student. She recounts:

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess – that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for “talking back” to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. “If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong” (Anzaldúa 850).

Punishing students physically and psychologically for speaking their native language, as Anzaldúa’s teacher did without hesitation in the previous quote, exemplifies one of the horrible ways that linguistic terrorism is inflicted on the native tongues of immigrant students in American classrooms. Although the physical punishment that Anzaldúa received is not something that would be tolerated under any circumstances in classrooms today, many harsh punishments still exist for students who speak their native language even briefly in classrooms where English Only is strictly enforced. It is truly sickening that a country that reserves the right to free speech for its citizens would enforce such an oppressive policy against languages other than English. If we allow this infringement on the basic rights of our students to continue, it will only lead to further oppression of the rights of minority groups in the classroom.

Anzaldúa not only recalls specific instances of visible punishment for speaking her native tongue, but also the less visible scarring of identity that such linguistic oppression can perpetuate. “Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self,” she claims, even going so far when describing her own self-identity to declare, “I am my language” (Anzaldúa

853-854). The biographies of Richard Rodríguez and Ariel Dorfman also uphold the idea that language is a fundamental part of identity (Ramsdell). While Rodríguez recounts the painful endeavor of his family switching their home language from Spanish to English and Dorfman explains the assets and drawbacks of being bilingual, both authors experienced a lot of pain and difficulty in their identity formation as a result of neglecting or forgetting their mother tongue entirely (Ramsdell). Paul DeMan's psychological research submits that language is not only a part of identity, but "language precedes identity," which further multiplies the seriousness of linguistic oppression of minority languages in the classroom (Ramsdell 167).

Unfortunately, linguistic oppression is not only a product of the ignorant and the racist, but it is primarily a product of the English power culture that has been created and continuously reinforced in the United States. From a very young age, Anzaldúa recalls her mother continuously exhorting her in Spanish, "Pa'hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien," which essentially translates to, "To get a good job, you need to learn how to speak English well" (850). For native speakers of English, this does not pose any sort of problem or result in any discrimination. However, by requiring a proficiency in English in almost all lines of work, education, and daily life, immigrants feel the pressure on almost a daily basis to adapt to the dominant language of English. This is not to say that encouraging immigrants to learn English is wrong. But the idea that immigrants are expected to learn English *immediately* in order to secure basic rights such as education and employment is a flagrant demonstration of how the English language is used as a power culture and an oppressive instrument against minority and immigrant populations. Although many people view this as a mere hypothesis, Anzaldúa testifies that she and other people of color constantly "suffer economically for not acculturating" in the United States (857).

Delpit further explores the idea of power culture in the education system, which she summarizes in five key points. The first three points essentially explain that power culture manifests itself in various forms in the classroom and that this particular power culture has many unspoken rules of conduct. However, according to Delpit, points four and five are by far the most disturbing and therefore the least acknowledged:

4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture make acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence (282).

Anzaldúa's experiences and expressed views of power culture in the United States align perfectly with Delpit's argument. Once Anzaldúa had been told repeatedly by her schoolteachers and her mother that she would not be able to succeed in the United States without a proficiency in English, she learned "standard and working class English" and used English as her primary language in "school, the media, and job situations" (851). Rather than being encouraged in her endeavors to learn English and feeling accommodated when her proficiency was lacking, Anzaldúa lamented, "I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me" (854).

While many people herald the benefits of a single language in the United States and submit that unity of language is essential in uniting a people, the diversity that this country has historically valued coupled with the benefits of bilingual education easily refute this totalizing viewpoint. Due to the power culture of English and the pressure to assimilate, many students inevitably lose any fluency they once had in their home language if they do not utilize it enough.

Many languages are completely lost or endangered because the people who once spoke these languages have adopted another power culture language in order to survive, a phenomenon that is more fully explored by Hornberger in her analysis of Indigenous language revitalization, which focuses primarily on Quechua, Guarani, and Maori. Since these languages have become so rare and endangered, these languages have been incorporated into biliteracy programs in their respective parts of the world in order to preserve these languages while also aiding students in learning the power culture language. Hornberger's research also yielded important findings on bilingual education practices everywhere, including the simple principle that "until [students] can use [their] *first language* (L1) in *productive* and *receptive, written* and *oral* modes at school, it will be difficult for [students] to develop [their] *second language* (L2) to its fullest" (285). Thus, it is in the best interest of all immigrant students in the United States whose first language is not English to first become proficient in their first language and then become proficient in English, something that is most easily facilitated in young children through bilingual learning practices. This is not always the best solution for immigrants in the United States education system, but it is a more desirable alternative when compared to the linguistic oppression and discrimination that minority language students so often experience.

Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" doesn't explicitly offer any proposed solutions to the linguistic terrorism perpetuated by the English power culture in the United States; however, proposed solutions are interwoven subtly through all of her works. Valuing language as identity, respecting first languages, giving voices to marginalized people, and perpetuating a culture of "inclusivity" rather than discrimination are only a few of the proposed reforms that Anzaldúa presents in her writings (838). In an article reflecting what Anzaldúa and other feminist writers have taught her, Schweitzer submits that one of Anzaldúa's most important

contributions to intercultural relations was the concept of “producing, rather than initially requiring, equality” (287). By putting this simple practice into action in the American education system, students and teachers alike would be encouraged to create equality in the classroom where equal treatment and opportunity have been previously lacking. Recognizing the existence of linguistic oppression in the classroom and English as a power culture is only the first step; what must necessarily follow is the action required to promote equality for native speakers and non-native speakers in the classroom and, eventually, the United States as a whole.

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