

MENTAL COLONIZATION: FIGHTING AN EXTENSION OF COLONIALISM IN THE
AMERICAS THROUGH CHICANX AND INDIGENOUS WORKS

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Writers like northSun and Gloria Anzaldúa dissect the complexities of forming and maintaining Chicana and Indigenous identities in this era of mental colonization. northSun does this by examining what is expected of her to be “Indian” enough in her poem “i gotta be Indian tomorrow.” Anzaldúa achieves this by exploring the connection between language and identity for Chicanas who lie in an ethnic gray area in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”. These texts elucidate very common issues that Native Americans and Chicanas face as they struggle to cement their identities in America. They speak to how, in the process of performing their identity within a post-colonial society, their ERIs rely on others to define what is Indigenous, Chicana, American, and Latina enough. While successful performances are validating in the short term, they uphold colonial ideals of what a good minority looks like and consequently, the hierarchy itself.

To better analyze the experiences these writers describe, it is important to expand these statements with their historical contexts. According to Peter Harrison, the present-day United States was heavily colonized by European countries throughout the 16th and 17th centuries (3-24). During this time, explorers recorded what they saw through chronicles, journal accounts, and travel narratives. These texts included many descriptions of Indigenous Peoples that painted a clearly-defined image of Indigenous Peoples for Europeans. Of course, their positionality meant that these images were highly simplified and Eurocentric, creating a framework for understanding these cultures that relied heavily on their “inferiority”. Thus, with the assistance of

Christian religious precedents, they were effective in justifying the displacement of these groups. These attitudes did not dissipate once they had successfully taken the land for themselves leading to the genocide of Native Americans that prevailed centuries beyond when the Spanish lost their hold in the Americas.

As Morales explains in his article, “Latinx: Reserving the Right to the Power of Naming,” during this transition from colonial to post-colonial times, miscegenation begins to take hold giving rise to new groups (209-26). The one most relevant to Latinx identities was labeled Mestizo or people of Spanish and Indigenous descent. This label was used as a way of describing mixed children similarly to mulatto or creole peoples. Importantly, these labels represent a troubling trend that continues today: cultural genocide. As articulated by Morales, many scholars have a problem with these labels that have been “seen as a crossroads of Spanish and Indigenous identity because that crossroad would ultimately erase indigenesness” (219). These “mixed” children had to align themselves with their Spanish heritage and their proximity to whiteness or accept the consequences that came with being Indigenous. Unsurprisingly, many were forced to reject their Indigenous lineage to avoid the social consequences. This caused a rift between Mestizos and their native heritage. In turn, their assimilation became a means of destroying native culture alongside the previously stated means.

This did not, however, mean that they held a high place in society, especially after the formation of the United States when Spain lost power. Mestizos found themselves lower in the racial hierarchy. Their Indigenous features became much more important because their proximity to the Spanish no longer aligned them with the dominant culture. Chicanxs found themselves alienated from other Latinx cultures due to their Americanized cultural practices even though America forced them to assimilate through violence, discrimination, and demonization. This led

to the Chicana culture growing due to their separation from Latinxs and the American public (Muñoz Jr. 31-52). This came to a head during the Chicana movement where Mexican-Americans found themselves fighting for equal opportunities and the right to maintain their own culture and language after being rejected by both sides. The movement also marks a new attitude towards the native heritage of the Chicana people wherein they begin to acknowledge their heritage to curtail the Spanish monopoly on their cultural identity.

History makes one thing very clear: Europeans have always had the power to define the identities of minority groups and used this to privilege themselves over others. Identity was no longer a personal, culturally complex amalgamation of biology, culture, and experience. It was determined based on how well people fit into the hegemonic ideal of Indigeneity or Hispanicity. These groups are then dehumanized by being ignored, denigrated, or tokenized. These minorities are put in an impossible position where they can neither have their identities reified by their culture nor the dominant one. If they choose to align with the dominant culture in America, they are ostracized by their immediate culture.

nila northSun speaks to this in her poem “i gotta be Indian tomorrow.” She describes how a radio show “decided they needed a native american.” First and foremost, the word “decided” implies a strategic motivation for her invitation and takes away the autonomy of any such Indigenous person to choose to engage in this dialogue. It seems like they wanted to check a box so they could seem more inclusive or socially aware. But the mere fact that they concluded that they needed a “native american” rather than her for what she had to say implies a tokenization of the Indigenous identity. This is emphasized by the fact that Native American is not capitalized. Nouns are capitalized to signify respect and by including this subtle detail she communicates how dehumanizing this act of “inclusion” really is.

Subsequently, she expresses feeling panicked because she may not be “indian” enough. Her body of work is not entirely about being Native, nor does it employ stereotypical Indigenous symbology which would make the general population content to label her “Native enough”. As conceptualized by Shelby R. Crow, northSun illustrates a double consciousness in which she internalizes her “identity through a white-essentialized lens” (330). She uses this poem to detail the thought process of how she utilizes this double consciousness to develop a looking-glass self of what she should look like as an Indigenous woman.

Though she did not need to, northSun displayed the salience of her Indigeneity to her overall identity through her pride in her heritage and her awareness that some will find her ethnic performance unconvincing. In doing so, she highlights the cognitive dissonance that occurs when a double consciousness facilitates this looking-glass self despite fervent identity salience. In simpler terms, it illustrates how even though saliency is a protective factor, mental colonization is very powerful. It is seemingly an intentional choice to demonstrate why she has no reason to question her identity at the critique of people using her for clout. She also uses her experience to display that being emotionally invested in the perception of others is not uncommon or bad but rather a natural reaction within our societal context which may help others avoid guilt over these same internal conflicts. In this way, it calls out how colonial mindsets are powerful and must be addressed while simultaneously creating a safe space within the community for speaking openly about their struggles with identity.

Gloria Anzaldúa speaks about what this meant for the Chicana identity in the aftermath of the divorce from their Indigeneity in a chapter from her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* entitled “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”. She states that “wild tongues can’t be tamed, They can only be cut out” (54). This sentiment, while very visceral, delivers the message

of the piece: that the language used by Chicanxs is inherently tied to their identity and as such cannot be taken away. Chicanxs receive negative messages from both sides of their heritage because the language they use is neither fully English nor fully Spanish. Though it is a complete language with its own grammatical rules, Americans wish they would speak English and fully assimilate while Latinxs from Spanish-speaking countries find their dialect a “bastardization” of Spanish signifying a betrayal of their culture. Anzaldúa makes it very clear that these messages are limiting and aimed at destroying the Chicane identity in favor of an American or Pan-ethnic Latinx one. She speaks to the insecurities felt by Chicanxs in almost every space but their own. Chicanxs are neither American enough nor Latinx enough. She argues that rather than assimilating into one or the other it is time that people respect the Chicane identity as a distinct group rather than a bastardization. The latter idea is a disservice to this unique identity that arose from colonization, immigration, and the need to survive. It is a way of shaming people for not conforming to either identity while simultaneously not accepting them fully into either. Thus, it too is a form of mental colonization.

Anzaldúa suggests that addressing these differences and finding confidence can be protective of the Chicane identity. This is supported by research that indicates the value of language in avoiding mental colonization. Velia Rincon and Leah Hollis conducted a phenomenological study of code-switching in Chicane college students as a means of resisting mental colonization (Rincon, et.al 232-245). They found that many of the students who had family support, a sense of belonging, and a belief in a better quality of life also participated in code-switching behaviors. This led them to the conclusion that these were tactics used by the students to maintain their ethnic identities and avoid mental colonization in a predominantly white academic space. In code-switching, they effectively allow themselves to delineate their

mixed identity without needing to accommodate others. In the end, Rincon and Hollis recommend that code-switching behaviors are encouraged and facilitated to avoid this cultural denigration in white or Latinx spaces.

Importantly, this study is arguing something very different from Anzaldúa in its advocacy for code-switching, but it supports her contention that language is connected to identity and that spaces in which language can be celebrated are protective for the Chicanx community. Ideally, these behaviors would not be required to avoid internalized inferiority, but what this suggests is that this code-switching gives Chicanxs access to previously “off-limits” spaces designed for social advancement, like universities, while simultaneously giving them space to celebrate their identities and culture. Anzaldúa seemingly disagrees with this idea by saying “Until I am free to write bilingually...my tongue will be illegitimate”. Essentially, by forcing Chicanxs to choose one language to speak legitimately, you are denigrating the Chicanx language to such an extent that it illegitimizes the Chicanx identity. As such, Anzaldúa is arguing for the radical legitimization of the Chicanx dialect of Spanish rather than code-switching behaviors as a means of freeing Chicanxs from mental colonization.

Both women assert that their identities should be allowed to be created by themselves on the individual level via northSun and by the group level via Anzaldúa. Additionally, they challenge ideals of being “ethnic enough.” northSun describes how family and spirituality create salience in her life while Anzaldúa shows how language has created meaning for her identity. Their descriptions are very different in content and method but both are valid. In doing so, they expose the harmful ways that social and linguistic tactics are used to essentialize identities as a means of continuing mental colonization and how these tactics are experienced almost ubiquitously by Chicanx and Indigenous populations. Chicanx and Indigenous groups are not

monoliths and engage with their identities in different ways and thus will never fit a stereotype that satisfies the stereotypes of the dominant group.

As illustrated by concepts like double consciousness and the looking-glass self, Mental Colonization works because there is an existing power structure that forces the oppressed to aspire to the status of the oppressor. This incentivizes minority groups to buy into negative messaging about what their identities “should” look like. Additionally, it not only exists within this power structure, but actively enforces it by placing the ethnic groups in a hierarchy. It is important to note that this is because historically, Mestizos were placed above Black and Indigenous People of Color and have in some ways been complicit in the oppression of others in the pursuit of their freedom. It is in this way that mental colonization is a tool for white supremacy. In getting populations to believe in the inferiority of themselves and other groups, the dominant group has isolated these groups within the hierarchical structure which makes radical acceptance very difficult. It perpetuates a zero-sum game meaning that not only are white people enforcing top-down dynamics but so are minority groups themselves. This is where these authors utilize their works to attack these mindsets through honesty, openness, irony, and relatability. In a sense, they are creating a rhetorical safe space for their communities to explore their identities, not outside this hierarchical structure, but with an understanding of it. In conclusion, challenging mental colonization and white supremacy will allow minorities to cement their socio-cultural identities through their own lenses. It is through this process that an ideology of ethnic and racial equality can replace these internalized colonial attitudes.

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