Living with(out) borders: The intimacy of oppression

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A R T I C L E I N F O

Article history:
Received 16 May 2013
Received in revised form 2 October 2013
Accepted 11 October 2013

Keywords:
Anzaldúa
Merleau-Ponty
Oppression
Intimacy
Lived body
Intersubjectivity

A B S T R A C T

Recounting the multiple oppressions of the queer Chicana, Anzaldúa describes this as the “intimate terror” of being caught in-between the different worlds she inhabits. In this paper I argue that the theme of intimacy is crucial for understanding the political life and its hold on the subject’s body. My discussion of intimacy and oppression begins in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy because it presents an influential and constructive way to think about intersubjective relations and the intimate way we inhabit our worlds. I am particularly interested in his description of the body as a desiring body that is without borders and encroaches on other bodies. The writings of Anzaldúa, Hooks, Fanon, and Ahmed importantly complicate the initial analysis. While understanding bodies as “living without borders” is helpful for beginning to understand the intimate structure of oppressive relations, it does not yet make sense of the very real and oppressive borders that we might encounter on a daily basis. I suggest that we understand such borders as equally intimate, that is, as enacted sedimentations of the lived body. Thus I conclude that “because we are boundless” we engage in an intimate intersubjective relationship that is “boundary creating” and thus potentially violent.

The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the panic below the surface of the skin, daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee...Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. Alienated from her mother culture, “alien” in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits. (Anzaldúa, 2012: 42)

She drinks her coffee and trembles with fear, paralyzed by the panic that accompanies her everyday living in this world. Both shivering and petrified, in the quote above the feminist activist poet-philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa,1 captures as no one else the unbearable experience of the terror that is oppression. Recounting the multiple intersecting oppressions of a queer Chicana, Anzaldúa describes this everyday terror in terms of being caught: she cannot move backward or forward, she is immobilized, and held in an embrace that crushes her. To this extent, her description resembles Marilyn Frye’s well known definition of oppression because she is trapped between barriers which “restrain, restrict or prevent [her] motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce” (Frye, 1983: 2). But Anzaldúa says more than this, she recounts the isolation and the pervasiveness of a fear that does not let her enjoy her coffee in peace and she stresses the unbearable tension of being simultaneously shaken and unable to move. Both shivering and petrified, she breaks. Her body breaks, “fence rods in my flesh, /splits me /splits me” (Anzaldúa, 2012: 24). In this manner, Anzaldúa draws attention to the particular affective experience of being oppressed. She indicates that oppression is close to the skin, weighs heavily on one’s flesh, and crushes the lived body from multiple sides simultaneously. This emphasis on the closeness of oppression adds one more crucial aspect to her description: oppression is intimate.2 In this paper I argue that understanding the intimate closeness of our

1 Shortest bio GEA: Feminist visionary spiritual activist poet-philosopher fiction writer” (Anzaldúa, 2009: 3).

2 Anzaldúa’s account of oppression as an “intimate terror” that invades into the “inner life” of herself (2012: 43) has served as an inspiration for this paper. To describe oppression as intimate challenges and destabilizes the more ordinary understanding of intimate relations as loving and affectionate. I do this on purpose in order to bring out the affective dimension of oppression. This of course does not mean that we cannot still experience wonderful moments of genuine intimacy between subjects. The many other papers in this volume attest to this. I agree with one of my reviewers who writes that oppression crosses the line of intimacy into invasion and I add that unfortunately it is not always easy to separate the two. Any further analysis of work done in particular on violence in intimate relationships illustrates this sad fact (see for example the work collected in ‘Toole et al., 2007).
intersubjective lives is crucial for understanding the political life and
and its hold on the subject's body. To understand oppression as an
intimate experience, or as “intimate terrorism” (Anzaldúa, 2012:
42), helps understand its affective dimension, its suffocating
strength and deeply hidden roots, its inhabiting and restructur-
ing of the body, its manifestation in the patterns of the daily life and its
presence in one’s most familiar and personal spheres, and, most
importantly its tight intersubjective constitution.

My discussion of intimacy and oppression begins in Merleau-
Ponty’s philosophy because it presents an influential and
constructive way to think about intersubjective relations, the
lived-body, and the intimate way we inhabit our worlds. For the purpose
of this paper, I am particularly interested in Merleau-Ponty’s Nature
lectures and his description of the body as a desiring body that,
without borders or frontiers, encroaches, ‘bites,’ appropriate,
and occupies other bodies. In order to highlight the intimate violence of
oppressive relations, I read Merleau-Ponty’s work in light of the
writings of Bell Hooks, Franz Fanon, Sara Ahmed, and Gloria
Anzaldúa. Their accounts importantly complicate, critique, and
complete the initial analysis. Most importantly their work ad-
dresses the inherent power differential of oppression and describes
and analyses the very real and oppressive borders that we might
encounter on an everyday basis. In this paper, I suggest that in order
to cover borders through understanding them as equally intimate,
that is, as enacted sedimentations of the lived body. Thus I conclude
that because we are boundless we engage in an intimate intersub-
ject relationship that is boundary creating and thus potentially
violent.

Anzaldúa’s work frames the paper, interrupts, and critiques it.
As such the paper is a recreation of the process that shaped it. Time
and again I returned to her words in order to re-listen, re-think,
and re-write, to take inventory of the baggage we carry, and to partici-
pate in the difficult collusion—coalescence—work of making
meaning across borders (Anzaldúa, 2009: 144, 1990, xviii). Anzal-
dúa challenges anyone to “put history through a sieve” in order to
consiously “rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures
and religions” (2012: 104) and to “after reading this paper consider
making some decisions and setting goals to work on yourself, with
another” (2009, 155). A lot of my own work that is ongoing is such
work done after writing and reading. This is difficult and serious
work that involves amongst others facing my own whiteness, my
femininity, and other privileges and obstacles I encounter in the
world. Consequently, in addition to being part of the argument
and carefully interwoven within it, Anzaldúa’s words have taken a space
of their own in this paper, interrupting its flow with challenges and
visions.

In Collusion, in Coalition, in Collision (Anzaldúa, 2009: 144).
Alliance work is the attempt to shift positions, change positions,
reposition ourselves regarding our individual and collective
identities (143). Alliance stirs up intimacy issues, issues of trust,
relapse of trust, intensely emotional issues (146). What may be
“saving” the colored and white feminist movements may be
...tension between opposing theories...combined with respect,
partial understanding, love and friendship that keeps us
together in the long run. So mujeres think about the carnals
you want to be in your space. Those whose spaces you want
to have overlapping yours (154).4

1. An ontology of intimacy

The theme of intimacy is persistently present in Merleau-Ponty’s
discussion of the subject’s embodied being in the world.
Merleau-Ponty speaks of our intimate close contact with the world
in one of his compellingly beautiful working notes: “thus the body
stands before the world and the world upright before it, and be-
tween them there is a relation that is one of embrace. And between
these two vertical beings, there is not a frontier, but a contact surface”
(1968, 271; my emphases). With this image Merleau-Ponty ex-
presses that the subject’s body and the world that she finds before
her are intimately related to each other and interwoven with each
other. Significantly, he draws our attention to two main dimensions
of this intimate relationship. First, his rejection of frontiers in favor
of surfaces is important because surfaces are permeable whereas
frontiers call to mind borders that can only be crossed with
violence. Second, the reference to ‘being in contact’ specifically
brings to mind the sense of touch as it takes place at the level of the
skin. My skin continually touches the world while being touched by it
— by its objects, the other subjects in it, even the flow of air. This
inherent openness of the skin is well expressed by Sarah Ahmed
when she refers to the skin as this “border that feels,” (Ahmed,
2000: 45) and when in a Merleau-Pontian fashion she describes
it as the place where we make contact with the world, move it, and
are moved by it. She writes that through the surface of our skin we
are always already “exposed” and thus open to others (45). Thus,
Merleau-Ponty’s depiction of two embracing figures (subject and
world), his rejection of the term “frontiers,” and his emphasis on
the affective experience of being in contact, sketches an initial
outline of how our being in the world is intimate.

While continually indicating that the relationship he explores is
intimate, Merleau-Ponty also uses more violent terms to describe
this relationship. For example he comments elsewhere: “the thing is
...what bites into me, and what I bite into through my body”
(1973, 45n). There is in biting a true notion of reaching into
something and thus by referring to biting Merleau-Ponty draws
particular attention to the intertwining of the subject and the world.
The biting metaphor captures that we simultaneously taste the
world while we feel the ‘teeth’ of the world sinking into our flesh.
As such it adds an almost erotic dimension to our engagement with
the world. Not only do I see, hear, and feel the world, I also
simultaneously taste it, incorporate it, and am incorporated by it.
Thus, rather than a neutral, unaffected, and detached understand-
ing of the world, I am always already incorporated (folded-in) in the
world while we feel the

3 This paper is not the place to focus exclusively on my own feelings, to ask for
validation of my victimhood, or to confess and to be pardoned of certain
complicities. One cannot easily get rid of one’s complicity in a system of oppression
and one cannot presume that by merely stating one’s complicity one would be able
to regain a neutral voice [see also Anzaldúa’s discussion of a white guilt that howls so
loudly that it drowns out the voice of the woman of color [2009, 130]]. As I discuss
in this paper, our attachment to an oppressive system is deeply seated in the very
structure of one’s being. It is open to reformation through struggling at it (Hooks,
1984). Both my academic and my personal voice are heard throughout this paper,
but this paper is not written to make me the topic of interest. Instead I want this
interest to be directed to the voices of Anzaldúa, Hooks, Fanon, Ahmed and others
in order to understand the intimate structure of oppression.

4 Throughout this paper I will let Anzaldúa’s multilingual writing stand as it is.
Often the Spanish sections can be interpreted in context and often she says the
same thing again in English at a later time. Nevertheless these sections also add a
dimension of difficulty to a reader unfamiliar with the languages she uses. Her use
of Chicano Spanish expresses the particularity of her voice and has an important
effect of making the text escape from one’s full grasp. She writes: “until I am free to
write bilingually and to switch codes without always having to translate, while I
still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as
long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them
accompany me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (2012: 81).
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