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EDITORIAL: BIRTHPLACE OF A NEW WORLD: CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND THE PROBLEM OF PLACE IN THE AMERICAS

In her essay, "La Prieta," from the collection *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of her understanding of herself as a product of her polyglossic, hybrid cultural and racial experience. She writes:

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds ... straddling the walls between abysses ... Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the women's, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web (205).

For Anzaldúa, this experience is challenged (and challenging) not so much by its multiplicity, as by the incomprehension with which such variousness is often met in the larger world. "What am I?," she asks. "They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label. You say my name is ambivalence? ... Who, me confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me." (205).

Anzaldúa's rebellion against the imposition of such labels, which, in her view, would shatter the culturally hybrid individual into shards of disconnected, discontinuous cultural and historical experience, forms one of the most important foundations of her work. Her refusal of the cultural injunctions demanding that she choose between her multiple cultural and racial identifications also, however, marks a revelatory moment in the hemispheric study of culture in the Americas. As a quintessential "American," whose cultural affiliations extend outward like the branches of a tree while finding their roots in a single individual, Anzaldúa describes (through the depiction of her own painful and difficult journey toward self-acceptance), a racial, cultural and historical dilemma often neglected, yet crucial to a hemispheric understanding of the cultures and peoples of the Americas. It is, in fact, by this very multiplicity: cultural, racial, national, ethnic, economic, religious and/or historical, that cultural reality of the Americas such as that represented by Anzaldúa's experience may more fully begin to be studied. Through the his-



torico-spatio-geographical reorganization of culture that Anzaldúa suggests (and that hemispheric approaches to the study of the Americas often imply), new articulations of identity suggesting alternative modes and possibilities of being, new and challenging cultural realities and new opportunities for cultural encounter and understanding are more profoundly revealed. These alternative perspectives, not linked to one place but, rather, often derived from many, can then lead to numerous untried avenues of critical exploration and investigation, and opening many doors previously closed to knowledge and perception. For example, a hemispheric perspective can suggest the importance of comparative historical approaches to the cultural multiplicity represented by the experiences such as that of Anzaldúa. In addition, hemispheric perspectives might emphasize the significance of examining complicated genealogical affiliations, such as those with which Anzaldúa identifies, across national and geographical boundaries.

The current issue of the Review of International American Studies seeks to examine the notions of “America” and “American” as these have meaning outside of such boundaries, and as these cultural identifications become significant within a hemispheric and comparative, cultural understanding such as that put forward in this issue. Interrogating the notion of “America” from a hemispheric perspective also suggests a simultaneous consideration of the idea of modernity, particularly as concerns the historical interrelationships between various peoples of the Americas (whose beginnings lie to a large degree in the development of the New World and its role in the 16th-century transformation of mercantilism, or early capitalism, to capitalism).

In this instance, modernity becomes one of the conditions within which the type of cultural hybridity and multiplicity about which Anzaldúa has written comes into existence. It also describes one of the most illuminating contexts within which a comparative cultural investigation of hybrid historical realities such as hers may be undertaken. Thus, exploring the cultures of the Americas from a hemispheric perspective that also recognizes the historical significance of modernity can open up possibilities for cross-cultural, multilingual, and transnational dialogue. These possibilities are also difficult, if not impossible, to study adequately in more traditional contexts, since such dialogue does not take established national and/or geographical boundaries as one of its organizing principles.

Within the advent of the new intellectual paradigm of the Americas, it is the interstices between the seemingly stable categories and divisions described by nationally defined perspectives that are brought forward for study and investigation. By providing access to these cultural gaps, the hemispheric approach can offer a broader, more indepth understanding of important issues for the study of the Americas, such as immigration

and transnationalism, complicated ethnic historical interrelationships, or the cultural impact of globalization. And, as a result of this engagement, the meaning of modernity in hemispheric perspective is also necessarily interwoven with those perspectives exploring the cultures that are nationally defined, interactions and interrelationships – historical or otherwise – between not only the diverse peoples of the New World, but also the meaning and significance of their encounters with those of the Old – European, Asian or African.

This powerful interweaving is evident in each of the five essays that make up this special issue. While they derive from many different cultural locations in the Americas, each essay is concerned with the problem of place (whether that place is understood historically, culturally, geographically or physically), and the significance of place within both conventional and alternative constructions of individual cultural identity. Myriad questions derive from the essays' intellectual investigations: what is the role of place in the construction of identity? How can or should place be understood when filtered through multiple cultural affiliations? How do historical cultural conflicts in a given geographical location inflect our understanding of that location as a particular "place?" What is the meaning of place in the Americas? In various ways, these essays assert that there is never a one-to-one relationship between "place" and cultural identity in the Americas; rather, the reality of "place," defined nationally, geographically, historically or otherwise, often finds itself inextricably intertwined with ethnic cultural realities whose origins and significance lie far beyond the purview of a single location. Whether they describe the attempt to come to grips with a shattered history through intense encounter with another, and older, culture, the retrieval of linguistic authority in the face of cultural devalorization, the loss of cultural memory attendant upon a history of colonization, the difficulty of finding one's place within a condition of cultural hybridity, or the over-determination of identity in relation to one's "place" as a result of economic forces beyond one's control, all of the essays in this issue seek to reconcile the problem of place with the realities of cultural multiplicity and hybridity in the Americas, birth-place of a New World.

Cyraina E. Johnson-Roullier
Guest Editor

WORKS CITED:

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