

A Prelude to “Discursive Earthquakes”¹
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Main Entry: **1pre-lude**

Pronunciation: 'prel-"yüd, 'prAl-; 'pre-"lüd, 'prA-;... 'prE-"lüd

: an introductory performance, action, or event preceding and preparing for the principal or a more important matter

Merriam-Webster On-Line Dictionary

My grandfather taught me that every good storyteller always acknowledges the place from which her story came—a friend, a gathering, an experience.

Malea Powell

"Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed-Blood's Story"

From what place does this story come? San Antonio, Texas. There I stood before a full room of colleagues at a national conference and performed a piece that melded theory, story, and poetry.²

You look *exotic*,
Your hair's black,
Are you *foreign*?
Maybe...
 Latina or Chicana,
 or Arab,
 Italian or French,
 or Indian/s.

Where the Alamo is celebrated as the Texan defeat of Mexican “rebels” and where mestiza/os of these (so-called) rebels survive, I (pro)claimed an identity: a mixed-race young radical female teacher. Creating and performing this text aligned my subjectivities with my interventions to transform academe through its classrooms, curriculum, and discourses.

This story is part of a struggle to become, in Gloria Anzaldúa’s terms, an “independent scholar” (*Entrevistas* 19).³ And in my struggle to become, I remember that academe wasn’t designed to include “my kind,” and I maintain a persistent presence hoping to catalyze equitable change. This inquiry is part of my struggle: How do intellectuals—particularly those identifying as mestiza/os, mixed-bloods, hybrids, and exiles—mobilize their subjectivities to create new spaces in academe?

1 Following the example of my mentors, I express gratitude to those who made writing this paper possible. Love to my blood family spread over the states of America. Respect to my teachers Ellen Cushman, Jeffrey Grabill, Kenneth Harrow, Laura Julier, Malea Powell, and Victor Villanueva. Many thanks to my writing sisters Maricela Avalos and Deena Tyler. Affection to my dear friends Sarah Bristol, Dawn and Todd Comer, Andrea Hamor, and Jenn Nichols. Props to Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán for assisting with this paper’s abstract and to Tom Schouten for inspiring me to write true.

2 “Teaching from the Margins: Whiteness and Student Resistance.” Conference on College Composition and Communication. San Antonio, TX, March 2004.

3 She distinguishes between scholars “dependent on their discipline and their school in order to survive” and “independent scholars...who aren’t tied up to any institution” (*Entrevistas* 19).

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Public intellectuals challenge the value system of academe by starting with the assumption that all language use and ways of knowing are valuable and worthy of respect.

Ellen Cushman

"*The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research*"

I first encountered the phrase "border intellectual" while reading Gita Rajan's essay "(Con)Figuring Identity." In her analysis of Indo-British intellectuals writing postcolonial fiction, Rajan traces intertwined border crossings of bodies—movements between land and flesh, movements that are used to construct bodies of knowledge:

Kamal Markandaya crosses over into her husband's English body and land to situate her discourses of empire, nation, and progress. Contrapuntally..., [Ruth Praver] Jhabvala crosses into her Indian husband's land (although not necessarily his body) and claims the right to speak about neocolonization and modernity as a European [...]. Suniti Namjoshi, odd (wo)man out in this sequence, uses her lesbian body to tell *Feminist Fables*, crossing and recrossing, without warning, East-West, individual-collective, creative-critical, and real-surreal borders. (80)

In parallel, I explored borders as a concept-experience as articulated by C. Alejandra Elenes in "Reclaiming the Borderlands:"

The borderlands are the boundaries that Chicana/os live in that form a state of "belonging" and "not-belonging." These boundaries are the interstices between the so-called First and Third Worlds, Anglo-America and the symbolic spaces that confine people of color in the metropolis, and the formal and informal economy (the legal and the illegal). (363)

I contemplated how intellectuals from a range of disciplines and geographies, such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Malea Powell, and Gloria Anzaldúa, use their racial-ethnic-national experiences—movements between bodies of land, flesh, and knowledge—to create new discourses *while* these very experiences border their interventions.

And I enter this dialogue about border intellectuals from a paritucular disciplinary and geographic location: rhetoric-composition studies in the US. It's a field that aspires to interdisciplinary affiliations (to name a few: literary criticism, education, and communication studies). My position within this field is consciously political with a theoretical engagement of social reproduction, critical race, and postcolonial theories, and a practice that innovates learning-teaching with critical pedagogy, mobilizes resources in partnership with local communities, and advocates social justice and equity.

The phrase "public intellectual" frequently circulates in rhet-comp. Debates revolve around boundaries for intellectual activity: political stances in our classrooms and scholarship (Berlin; Shor), our responsibility to impact public policies and opinion (Abraham), and activism beyond the university (Cushman "Agent"). Such an intellectual in ancient Athens was called a *politikos*: not merely a professional orator or teacher but a political participant with rhetorical skills used in the interests of the polis.⁴

⁴ Trevor J. Saunders translates *politikos* as "a *politios* (citizen) active in running the affairs of the *politeia* (constitution) of his *polis* (state)" (42).

* * * *

I wanted to tell you that for most of us now writing it's not really a search for identity because we haven't really lost an identity. Instead, we're figuring out how to arrange, composer, all these facets of identity: class and race and belonging to so many worlds—the Chicano world, the academic world, the white world, the world of the job, the intellectual-artistic world, being with blacks and Natives and Asian Americans who belong to those worlds as well as in popular culture.

So here we are in a Borderlands—a *nepantla*. *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl term meaning “el lugar entre medio,” el lugar entre medio de todos los lugares, the space in-between.

Gloria Anzaldúa
Interviews/ Entrevistas

Conceptualizing the world of border intellectuals then means entering an on-going dialogue embedded with contested formulations. I join the dialogue as listener and contributor in order to trace praxis of intellectuals, praxis in the framework of theorist-educator-activist Paulo Freire—born in Brazil and exiled for 30 years—whom Abdul JanMohamed recognizes as a border intellectual (“Border Pedagogy”). For Freire, praxis is a theory-practice that depends upon dialogue to catalyze equitable change.⁵ In order to articulate the praxis of border intellectuals, we must trace both their theorizing as movement and their subsequent methodologies of mediation. At this point in time, as I compose this “pre-conference” paper, my articulation of theorizing movement and mediation methodologies is a montage...

As border-crossers, these intellectuals continuously traverse multiple shifting boundaries: racial/ethnic, national, economic, gendered/sexual. But they aren't crossing-over from one (de)finite identity or positionality to another; rather they make knowledge of self and world through movement. By comparing the paradigms of border intellectuals (to name a few: mixed blood, *mestizaje*, queerness, Third Space), their theories align as a traveling-through betweenness. (Abstract for “Discursive Earthquakes”)

An explicit moving *between* and *through* borders that is aware of boundaries as constructed things. A fluid but not a fleeting presence. In other words, it's not simply a mind game; there's materiality, consequence. A constant tension that navigates borders as they're constituted through bodies of land, flesh, and knowledge.

And border intellectuals aren't simply constructing fluid robust subjectivities; more importantly they use these constructions to resist, survive, and transform Othering. Their parallel practices mediate objectification-as-Other. By navigating bodies of knowledge, land, and flesh, border intellectuals perform mediation with multiple methodologies... (Abstract for “Discursive Earthquakes”)

Methodologies synthesizing epistemologies and practices: epistemologically in what is valued as knowledge, how it's valued, and why it's valued; practically in how knowledge is used and then realized. Mediating hostile environments through constant movement. Shifting in defiance of systematization to create new spaces by writing re/generative discourses.

⁵ I offer this summary of Freire's version of praxis from his collective work, including *Education for Critical Consciousness*, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. See the works cited for publication details.

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It is not what minority *is*, but what minority does, or what is done in its name, that is of political and cultural significance. And in order to be able to determine that, we have to explore the political *movement* within the interstices of difference...

Homi Bhabha

"*Editor's Introduction: Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations*"

Abdul JanMohamed's "Worldliness-without-World"—the essay that put the phrase "border intellectual" into circulation—offers points of convergence and divergence with the framework that I'm constructing through the works of intellectuals such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Homi Bhabha, and Malea Powell. Here I must address a few of these points with the aim to construct a re/productive—not reductive—framework for tracing the praxis of border intellectuals.

JanMohamed's "general statements about the circumstances of border intellectuals" (114) correspond to my framework on some points of theory and methodology. In my framework, movement is paramount to understanding how border intellectuals theorize knowledge. Their movements are an experiential simultaneity of positions that create, in Elenes's words, "a state of 'belonging' and 'not-belonging'" (363). For JanMohamed, subjectivities are constituted in similar terms: a simultaneous rupture-suture as "the border subject becomes the site on which a group defines its identity" (115), and a simultaneous construction as "a subject-as-space" (116). His recognition of simultaneity is a point of convergence.

Also, mediation is paramount to my framework in the ways that border intellectuals' methodologies are designed and used. Their methodologies must negotiate the borders imposed upon them as well as that realities of, in Anzaldúa's words, "belonging to so many worlds" (*Entrevistas* 238). What JanMohamed identifies as "political phenomenology" (109)—an hermeneutics that is "attentive to the rhetorical construction of all discursive formations and subject-positions" (117)—resembles my conceptualization of mediating methodologies. This hermeneutic approach is designed from *within* the border intellectual's subjectivity—in Bhabha's words, "the political *movement* within the interstices of difference" (437)—and is consequential (read: has consequence) to advocating knowledge from this subjectivity.

For this framework under construction, the most useful (read: re/productive) aspect from JanMohamed's analysis is mapping border intellectuals' relationships with bodies of land and flesh (in his words, "collective identities") as well as the outcomes of their interventions. In the case of Edward Said, JanMohamed maps several points: Said's relationships to Palestine and the US (104), the function of his methodology as "a set of mirrors" making visible to the West its cultural "structures and functions" (105), and his product/ion of a Palestinian history (104). Tracing the praxis of border intellectuals then requires examining how they relate to and impact particular bodies of land, flesh, and knowledge.

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It would seem that an Indian scholar is in an impossible bind. Limited by the master narratives constructing her, the stories she can tell *that will be heard* are limited. What I am suggesting is that there are some stories that can be told and heard, like this story I am telling, revelatory stories that open space for counter-stories and resistance, mixed-blood stories told from the borders of Indian-ness, American-ness, Scholarly-ness.

Malea Powell

"*Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed-Blood's Story*"

What most significantly is at odds between JanMohamed's framework and the one that I am constructing is the role of subjectivities. In an interview with *Jouvert*, JanMohamed explains his skepticism toward "the tendency of contemporary critics to incorporate their own 'subject position' in their criticism." He explains:

I am suspicious of this move because I think it is accompanied by an assumption that if a critic articulates her/ his subject position then her/ his criticism is somehow freed from the biases produced by social determinations. Now, I don't believe that my articulation of my subject position necessarily frees me of my biases: these biases are very often unconscious... (Goudie)

This imagined line between "textual" and "autobiographical subject positions" (Goudie) is the basis by which he constructs a border between syncretic and specular intellectuals: the syncretic synthesizes aspects of "two cultures" and is at home in both, while the specular examines both cultures and is "unable or unwilling to be 'at home'" in either (JanMohamed "Worldliness" 97); the syncretic fills and bridges gaps, while the specular reflects upon the gaps and how these spaces work (114); and most telling, the specular becomes specular through agency (116).

JanMohamed constructs this dichotomy upon a certain concept of "interstitial cultural space," which he privileges to be occupied by the specular intellectual. The space is an aporia (96) from which to analyze (read: observe) the cultures within which the specular intellectual doesn't fit (97). It "revolves around the relationship between the quieting of the authorial will and the advocacy, direct or indirect, of a revitalized will" (108). It's here that transcendence beyond "ideological boundaries of home" (110) is possible. "Distance" (111) and "separation" (110) from home are privileged.

But why must a border intellectual be one kind *or* another? And what are the consequences of privileging a certain intellectual as the *only* kind operating with agency from an interstitial space? So how does such a space change when examining it through theories and methodologies of mestizaje, mixed-bloodness, and hybridity? And what happens when a border intellectual's relationships to bodies of land, flesh, and knowledge change? With these questions in mind, the challenge that I level against this framework is not a debunking of interstitial cultural space as a useful concept or two possible paradigms through which border intellectuals work. I challenge the inflexibility of such a framework, which freezes border intellectuals' subjectivities and methodologies when their experiences are multi-layered, intersecting, and in motion.

* * * *

I am visible—see this Indian face—yet I am invisible. I both blind them with my beak nose and am their blind spot. But I exist, we exist. They'd like to think I have melted in the pot. But I haven't, we haven't.

Gloria Anzaldúa
Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera

JanMohamed's framework is revealed as reductive through a telling use of language. Calculating "distance" from cultures of origin, he proposes that specular intellectuals "can begin to break free from their indigenous formation by crossing borders" (99). Comparing experiences of exile and immigrant,⁶ he claims that, "For the indigenous subject, who is a part of the prevailing cultural discourse, intentions and beginnings will at best be mundane problems" (107). Concluding the essay, he esteems that specular intellectuals are able to overcome "the coercive tendencies of fixed, indigenous identities" (118).

Certainly, JanMohamed isn't using "indigenous" in the same sense as the United Nations:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.⁷

When he uses "indigenous," he simply means from one's place of origin, so simply that a Brit then is "indigenous" to the UK. Even within his intention, though, "indigenous" is problematic: It's a catchall phrase for a suspicious subjectivity that's simple. In other words, identifying with your home or origins means that you're less distanced from the borders that constitute you than the specular (superior?) intellectual, meaning that you're less able to "see" those borders, meaning that you can't see yourself or the world in which you live.

For the framework that I'm constructing, such a reduction limits tracing the praxis of border intellectuals, especially those identifying as indigenous, mixed, and/or hybrid. For intellectuals like Gloria Anzaldúa and Malea Powell, indigenous roots aren't nostalgic or necessarily constrictive. Indigeneity contributes to their interventions of dominant discourse, their creation of spaces through inventing discourses shaped by ancient traditions, cultures, and histories. Consequently, for indigenous peoples and intellectuals theorizing knowledge in relation to indigeneity, "intentions and beginnings" are not "mundane problems."

⁶ He reduces movement between borders to one flesh-body moving from one land-body to another land-body. There's no recognition of bodies of land and flesh as multifaceted and shifting.

⁷ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development, Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Workshop on Data Collection and Disaggregation for Indigenous Peoples, New York, 19-21 January 2004.
<<http://www.un.org/esa/socdeb/unpfii/documents/>>.

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