

The Carving and Healing of a Wound: Linguistic Homelessness and Disidentification as Survival

Daniela Rodriguez A.

<https://doi.org/10.51897/interalia/CAVN2128>

abstract

Building on the work of chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa and queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz this paper analyses and discusses the affective component of language for those whose first language has been overshadowed by a second language. I ask how language affects the self's sense of identity/belonging, the possibility for communicating / accessing queerness, and what linguistic or poetic tools can be employed to empower the self. Following the tradition of feminist thought that assumes that the personal is political, I write from personal experiences. As a Colombian-born migrant in Sweden, I explore how the overshadowing of my mother tongue (Spanish) by Swedish (as the language with the perceived highest social and cultural value in Swedish society) has impacted on my self-image, sense of identity, self-worth and queerness.

Gloria Anzaldúa inspires me to mix languages and push the boundaries of the academic text format. Confronting it with a poetic, violent and *desbordado* language, I challenge normative ideas of academic writing, but I also hope that others might find beauty in the decisive ambiguity and the mixing of languages. I engage with what Gloria Anzaldúa (2012, 1984) and Cherrie Moraga (1984) call *theorizing from the flesh* and turn to concepts such as *linguistic terrorism*, while also approaching José Esteban Muñoz's *brown feelings* (2020). Furthermore, I build on Torres (2017) who argues that the emotional bonds bilinguals have to different languages intersect with their sense of identity and place, thus evoking various emotions and memories. From here, I conclude that having one's first language be overshadowed by a second one creates ambiguity and confusion about the self's identity. Feeling homeless in language translates into an uncertainty about one's claim to any citizenship or cultural identity, thus leading to anxiety, sadness and sense of non-belonging. I contrast this with the concept of *disidentification* (Muñoz 1999), which opens practices of survival through entering *queer temporality* and embracing ambiguity. Accordingly, the confusion about a defined identity (going along with a particular language) can become useful for negotiating the self's queerness. For Muñoz, neither opting for assimilation nor counteridentification, but disidentifying allows the self to (re)construct a sense of identity and belonging.

keywords

affect theory, brown feelings, autoethnography, disidentification, linguistic homelessness

*Homeless in language. Destitute. A cast out. Cast away.
Sailing with no destiny. Struggling. Struggling.
Desterrada. Sedienta. Hambrienta. Vacía.
Begging for the end, or the beginning.
A home. Mi hogar.*

*I surrender to the Parca.
Arrópame y arrúllame.
Entrégame en brazos y déjame entrar.*

*Drowning. Me hundo.
Sigo la corriente hacia abajo.
Lo profundo, el inframundo.
Hogar de monstruos y aberraciones.
En casa al fin.
Transformed. Transcended.
Viva y muerta.*

Prelude

This paper discusses and analyses the affective component of language for those whose first language has been overshadowed by a second language. Specifically, I chose to focus on my own experiences as a Colombian-born Swedish immigrant. I take help and inspiration mainly from chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa and feminist and queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz to unravel my wounds, focusing on the displacement of my mother tongue (Spanish) by Swedish as the language with the highest social and cultural value in Swedish society, and the consequent impact on my Self's sense of identity, belonging, and queerness¹. I specifically ask how language affects the Self's sense of identity/belonging, the possibility of communicating and accessing queerness, and which linguistic or poetic tools can be employed to empower the Self.

Following the tradition of feminist theorists like Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, I write in a "language" and style true to myself, in the hopes that not only might others be able to find beauty in their ambiguity, but also that I might be able to heal some of those pains I have carried with me for a long time. In part, my intention is to create discomfort or confusion in the readers by practicing linguistic mixture, thus imitating the feeling of disorientation many migrants know too well when faced with a foreign language and culture. However, my main intention is for this text to be aimed at those people the academic world often ignores, the ones who struggle to tell their stories and often – just to be heard – must transform and translate their experiences to be intelligible to the English-dominated academic world.

Furthermore, the text is divided into three parts. Parte I, "The Wounding," deals with the disintegration of the Self due mainly to acts of linguistic terrorism aimed at forcing linguistic assimilation. It also explores my entry into *El Mundo Mudo* as a consequence of acts of linguistic terrorism, but also as a survival

strategy. Parte II, “La Sanación,” follows the different linguistic strategies I have employed to reintegrate the Self – not as it was, but as something entirely different. The last part, “Postlude: Las Cicatrices,” works as the conclusion to the text, tying together the initial questions of the essay and summarising my consequent findings.

Parte I: The Wounding

The Desire to Belong and Linguistic Terrorism

I was born in Colombia approximately in 1996. I was eight years old the first time I left the only country I had known. It was my first time on a plane and the first time being away from my father and my grandparents. Confused, afraid, but most of all anxious for what was to come, I was led to a new life by my mother’s hand. The warmth of the Cuban breeze greeted my mother, my sister, and I to the unknown, and the darkness of the Caribbean night functioned as a veil, shielding us from the reality of the precarious situation. Two years went by as my body and mind acclimatized to a new reality. When I finally started to feel at home in that once-foreign place, the second reckoning came crashing down, *como el sofocante diluvio que cobijó a Noe ante el amanecer de un nuevo mundo*. Once more, I had to stuff my life inside a suitcase, break all bonds I’d made, and prepare for a new beginning. It was different this time around, not only because the warmth had been replaced with a freezing wind, but because I was now expected to learn a whole new language – one that tasted only of hesitation and fear.

I distinctly remember how, during those first few months living in Sweden, everyone kept telling us we should speak Swedish at home so we would learn faster, completely ignoring the fact that Spanish was and is an integral part of who we were and are, and that for me and my sister it was one of the few things we had left from a time before, from a life we no longer had and could never return to. A life that had given us relationships that went beyond the biological, but that were now slowly being reduced to blood bonds. Cousins who I previously considered my best friends now became merely people I shared genes with, and with each day their absence took root, and the distance became greater. The white faces greeting us, welcoming us into a new world, were oblivious and perhaps indifferent to our pains and struggles. It seemed the only thing that really mattered was our integration, or rather our assimilation; the annihilation of our difference. In fact, that was probably my first encounter with what I call acts of *linguistic terrorism*. These acts only showed the indifference Swedes felt towards my native language, my mother tongue. Indeed, as Latino Studies professor and sociolinguistic researcher Lourdes Torres argues, even

though switching between languages is normal for people who grow up in a situation where two (or more) languages are spoken, it can “[...] provoke hostility from people who are monolingual yet share space with bilinguals” (2017: 274).

Todos repiten...

*Vad ni kan svenska!
Barn lär sig så snabbt så det kommer inte märkas snart!
Det hörs ingen brytning, du låter ju som en riktig svensk!
Du får lära dina föräldrar nu när du kan.
Och kom ihåg att prata svenska hemma så ni lär er snabbare*

*Aún después de diez años,
mi madre debe escuchar...*

Du måste bara lära dig mer svenska så du kan få jobb!

Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa remembers her mother telling her that she must learn to speak English correctly in order to find a good job because all her education meant nothing if she still spoke with an accent (2012: 75–76). In my case it was not my mother or father who urged me to devote myself to a language I had just met – no, that job was done by my surroundings, my social sphere. Just like Latinxs in the United States, I found myself immersed in a society that promoted monolingualism by assigning cultural and political value to the nation’s language (Torres, 2017: 280). For example, I saw my dad being constantly underestimated, dismissed, and infantilized, because he could not convey his ideas in Swedish, and because none of the people we met knew more than two words in Spanish. Therefore, I understood that no matter how smart I was, if I couldn’t speak Swedish without a foreign (undesired) accent I would forever be treated and looked at differently. So, I tried to rid myself of the parts of me that didn’t align with Swedish normativity because the alternative was terrorising.

Acts of *linguistic terrorism* became everyday occurrences in my life. Mostly there was nothing to do but accept it, smile politely, and try to change the subject of the conversation. As I grew accustomed to it, I also became numb towards it. However, all those small, almost indistinguishable acts of *linguistic terrorism* clasped onto my flesh like termites to a tree, clawing their way under my skin and devouring everything beneath – muscles, tendons, ligaments, bones. They left me bare and obsessed, wishing more than anything that I would be able to speak Swedish without an accent, to enunciate correctly, to go unnoticed when

I spoke, to evade the looks and the stares (sometimes of pity, sometimes of confusion and discomfort), and the inevitable recognition as the Other – an aberration, an abject.

During group projects in school, I dreaded having to write because it meant others would have to read my work. I always double- and triple-checked my spelling, reading and re-reading sentences over and over again. To my detriment there was always something wrong, something that didn't make sense, words I'd spelled incorrectly, grammatical errors I hadn't noticed. Regularly, I found myself stuck while writing in Swedish, thinking of a word in Spanish, or English, which just added to my frustration. I also remember walking home from school when I was thirteen, repeating aloud words I thought were difficult to pronounce – training my mouth, my lips, and my tongue to move *correctly*. I was moved to do all that, not because of some desire to integrate or learn a language I found interesting or beautiful, but rather because of a crushing fear of what it would mean for me if I remained an abject for much longer. Thus, before speaking I would start rehearsing, trying to match the Swedish pronunciation, moving my tongue while my mouth remained closed, hoping the training would be successful. Thinking about how my own voice sounded – if the intonation was correct or if there was any trace of an “undesirable” accent – became routine, an arduous and agonizing everyday ritual.

Norma Alarcón writes “the silence and silencing of people begins with the dominating enforcement of linguistic conventions [...] as well as the disenfranchisement of peoples by outlawing their forms of speech” (Alarcón, 1990: 363). In my case, the enforcement of linguistic conventions came in the form of social entry. Meaning, the more Swedish I learned and the less any undesirable accent was heard, the more I would be accepted – or at least, the higher the probability for acceptance and *gemenskap* became. As a little kid who had no friends in this strange, cold new country, the idea of not being wanted, of being *rechazada* haunted me. So, I did everything I could to prevent it, to keep myself from the pain of being unwanted and alone. As decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo notes of Frantz Fanon's work on the imperial/colonial idea of what it means to be human, “[...] the Negro from Antilles, the Indian from India and from the Americas or New Zealand [...], etc., ‘will come closer to being a real human being in direct relation to his or her mastery of disciplinary norms’” (Mignolo, 2009: 165). Meaning, in my case, the mastery of the Swedish language.

I carried on my back the agony of not knowing when (or whether) I would ever be able to pass linguistically, painfully letting it consume me slowly. Nonetheless, my attempts and intricate rituals to become fully Swedish were futile. I already faltered in the social ordering, already a disturbance in the normal order

of things. My very existence already queered time and space, making way for “[...] the unpredictable and the unknowable in time that governs, errant, eccentric, promiscuous, and unexpected organizations of social life” (Keeling, 2019: 19). A temporal and spatial aberration, I was, and still am, out of time, out of space, and ultimately out of language.

Aprendizajes Espinosos: El Mundo Mudo

*Mi repertorio lingüístico rasguña mi espalda,
perfora mi piel con hoz y rastrillo en mano,
cosecha un nido de dolor, un memento de sufrimiento.
Como espadas cargo mis cruces,
pesadas y torpes, me astillan.
Desenvainarlas se me dificulta.
El mango es frío, pero en mis entrañas el ardor crece.
Mis manos sudan, mi corazón se acelera.*

*Vulnerable, con el cuello contra el viento.
Una daga se aproxima,
rápida, silenciosa, filosa y brillante.
El resplandor me ciega y la cuchilla me corta.
Ahora la desesperación y la vergüenza se adentran.
Decadencia, mis fibras envenenadas.
Soy solo carne, sangre, sudor y lágrimas.*

*El baile de hierro es sombrío y puede matar.
Los movimientos, precisos y letales.
La aniquilación, inminente.
La tierra abierta devora.
Sepulcro y nido.
Muerte y renacimiento.*

The desire to belong pushed me farther than I thought was possible, and still it never seemed to be enough (not for them, and certainly not for me). I often slipped, losing control of the façade I had carefully crafted. That linguistic *slippage* exposed my difference, making me unable to pass. It didn't seem to matter how much I tried to force my tongue to “behave,” my mouth kept leading me astray, forcing me to stretch and unfold. However, I resisted the stretching, I resisted becoming visible, and I fell for a destructive strategy that promised to make the fear more docile. I became skilled in the art of suppression, and I entered the realm of muteness – *El Mundo Mudo* – with fury and desperation. I

suppressed all the words in the language that had welcomed me into the world, I tossed them aside, ignored them, pretended they didn't exist. And thus, when confronted with the choice of expressing myself in Spanish or not expressing myself at all, I often chose the latter. Like other minoritarian subjects, I came to inhabit the realm of silence, the realm of muteness (Muñoz, 2006: 678–679).

Such silence made my ambiguity indistinguishable. It made the promise of Swedish acceptance a possibility, and thus I surrendered to it. In this way, I thought I had found freedom, so I dug my nails into it, clinging to silence for release. The words, the sayings, the feelings – all those things that existed outside the norm, I cast away hoping that would be enough to truly “pass.” However, I was corroding, *escarapelándome despacio*, as a result of the scorching silence I had embraced. Tragically and perhaps also ironically, my desperation to integrate, led me to *dis-integrate* (Ahmed, 2010: 155). I began feeling distressed when having to speak Spanish in front of native speakers. My mother tongue – which I had so forcefully tried to cut away – began to feel like a distant and foreign memory, one in the process of absolute fragmentation. The horror of that realization hit hard: I had chosen the language that had caused me and my family so much pain. I was betraying my blood, choosing the oppressor's language, actively aiding in its domination and heightening its glory, assuming its culture and supporting the weight of its civilization (Mignolo, 2009: 165, 166). Like Moraga, I felt frightened by the realization that I had internalised the racism I had encountered, and that the oppression that had crushed me for so long now lived inside me, ready to annihilate me and others (2015: 25, 27). I was haunted by the idea of being a *vendida* (a “sell-out”) (Anzaldúa, 2015a: 165), of betraying my culture and those like me (the Others) for individual gain, of taking advantage of racial hierarchy. I felt *bleached* (Moraga, 2015: 29).

Home began to feel less like a given and more like a terrorizing uncertainty. I no longer knew what my inner voice sounded like, or what I should even want it to sound like. Anzaldúa said “I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (2012: 81). And perhaps she was right, because the realm of muteness never called my name so loudly as when I felt I had no claim to any language. So, I took refuge in the only place I could call home: the silence. I was stuck with a Spanish that often felt like a thing of the past, a thing that wasn't mine anymore, and a Swedish that felt simultaneously foreign and familiar, and altogether unreachable. Alienated by both Spanish and Swedish, I became *homeless in language* and tried instead to plant roots in the realm of muteness to escape speech itself.

These days, being called out for not talking properly, for mispronouncing, forgetting, or misusing words, feels more normal than I would like to admit. Like

Anzaldúa, *soy una deslenguada, la del español deficiente, una aberración lingüística*, and because “[...] [I] speak with tongues of fire [I am] culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically [*soy huérfana*] [...]” (Anzaldúa, 2012: 80). In silence I could hide my linguistic orphanage, but the growing shame of ignoring my mother tongue and of not being brave enough to face the Swedish language only accumulated, growing uncontrollably and far beyond my reach, tainting each and every window of my being.

As a linguistic orphan, I inhabited what Kara Keeling calls *queer temporality* (2019: 17), a liminal dimension of the unpredictable, unknowable, and the errant. As a being simultaneously with no language and an abundance of languages, my very existence broke the illusion of a spatiotemporal logic dependent on (among other things) a *we* versus *them* dichotomy (Keeling, 2019: 116): I was a being of contradictions, both – Swedish and Colombian – but also neither. Furthermore, following Jose Esteban Muñoz I argue queer temporality is *brown*, in the sense, like queerness, that brownness connotes a sense of illegitimacy in relation to normative ways of *being* and living (Muñoz, 2020: 3), as well as, importantly, a call for resistance and perseverance, an attitude of *echar pa'lante* in the face of the loss and pain that comes from feeling linguistically destitute. Perhaps it was this perseverance that pushed me to use English. The need to belong, in addition to the constraints of *El Mundo Mudo*, condemned me to a life of silence, but somehow my tongue found a way to exist. It opted for a third language, one I had no carnal ties to, but that nonetheless existed in the fibres of my reality. I opted for a language I didn't feel I had to master completely, one that allowed me to be flawed because it was not supposed to be *my* language. Like all my other classmates, I was in the process of learning it – my spelling could get better, my vocabulary could improve – and most importantly, no one (not even I) could judge my identity or sense of belonging depending on how *authentic* my English was. That was my escape, the opportunity to rid myself of the expectations and pain.

However, surviving turned out to be insufficient. The affective weight of English paled in comparison to the other two languages in my repertoire. Therefore, even though English had allowed me to stand my ground before, I realised I could not keep wielding that language alone. The only way to move forward was to surrender to fragmentation, to allow myself to *feel brown* and to *feel down* (Muñoz, 2006: 676–679), tolerating and accepting the crushing feeling of loss and destitution as a fundamental part of my sense of Self, without wishing it away.

Parte II: La Sanación

Queer(ing) Desire: Disidentification and the (Re)discovery of (Self)-love

“Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. [...] Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, [...] and as long as I have to accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.”
(Anzaldúa, 2012: 81)

When I read Anzaldúa for the first time I think above all I felt a sort of relief, seeing her use freely, without shame, and rather with pride, what I had been trying to repress and change for so long. Anzaldúa not only added words in Spanish to her mostly English-written text, but also used Spanish as an integral part of her writing, enhancing her afflictions and joys by using a language close to her heart that succeeded in conveying her affect in a visceral way. Her use of language was bold and beautiful, not confusing, or exclusionary like I had always been led to believe by different teachers. Instead, it added to the content, gave it authenticity, a sense of purpose, and transformed it into something more, a performative utterance, a *brown utterance* (Muñoz, 2020: 46) and a *disidentificatory practice* (Muñoz, 1999). For Muñoz *disidentification* is a strategy that “works on and against” dominant ideology by neither opting for assimilation, nor opposition (1999: 11–12). Instead, disidentification aims to recycle and rethink encoded meaning to “[...] both expose [...] the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruit [...] its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (Muñoz, 1999: 31). Following Anzaldúa, I have also chosen to engage in the practice of disidentification by resisting English as the dominant academic language and refusing monolingualism as the norm. Therefore, I’ve continuously identified both with and against language throughout this paper, trying to simultaneously produce and perform a place where I can be acknowledged in all my ambiguity.

This disidentificatory practice of mixing languages is what Latin American theorist Walter Dignolo (who builds on Anzaldúa’s work) calls *bilanguaging*. A thinking in between languages and cultures that rejects imposed monolingualism and the hierarchy of additional bilingualism (Torres, 2017: 275–276). *Bilanguaging* is a way of life and a political process that can lead to “[...] social transformation and a politics and ethics of liberation” (Torres, 2017: 275). Similarly, Ofelia Garcia and Li Wei use the concept of *translanguaging* to convey a displacement of conventional understandings of bilingualism and multilingualism, which are often based on the idea that languages are distinct closed

systems. Instead, *translanguaging* conveys the fluid language practices of people in bi- and multicultural spaces (Torres, 2017: 275). This is what I am attempting in this paper by not treating the languages I have tasted as closed, separate systems, and instead as parts of a bigger structure containing multiple languages that complement each other. Through this text and these words, the practice and process of linguistic mixture becomes political, an affirmation of social transformation and a call to further change, challenge and *queer* normative structures that weigh down people like me. By disidentifying I create something new, perhaps a linguistic *in-between* space, a borderland language of some sort, because, as Anzaldúa reminds me, “[...] for the people who cannot entirely identify with either standard Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves [...]” (Anzaldúa, 2012: 77).

However, the practice of disidentification also entails a certain level of melancholia, one which stems from the need to (re)construct the Self’s identity through disidentification. Perhaps the melancholia stems from the mourning of a perceived wholeness that was lost, a wholeness in terms of language, which emphasizes monolingualism. By disidentifying, I am therefore also forced to remember that which was lost, which could have been, but ultimately wasn’t. Butler argues that while mourning a loss, one is not just mourning the person or object lost, but also the loss in the Self. Butler explains that the Self is socially constituted. Therefore, if “you” is part of what composes the “I,” it follows that by losing “you,” the “I” also goes missing (Butler, 2004). The complexity of the “I” which is constituted by the “you” also means that when losing something / someone, the Self doesn’t necessarily know *what* it is in that person/object the Self has lost. Therefore, mourning a loss also entails mourning the forced surrendering of the Self’s transformation. The uncertainty of the transformation also brews frustration because the Self must not only surrender to a change against its will, but also to a change that is unknown (Butler, 2004). In my case, losing a language, or rather, losing the relation I had with my mother tongue meant also losing (part of) that which binds me to family members in Colombia and the larger Colombian culture. Perhaps the need to disidentify – which has become essential to my survival – is also a source of sadness given that it reminds me of the vulnerability I face while undergoing an inevitable and unknown transformation.

Furthermore, by disidentifying, I have also been able to negotiate the reality of my Self’s queerness. Meaning, by disidentifying with one language or word, and thus opting for neither assimilation nor counteridentification, I have found a way to (re)construct my Self’s sense of sexual identity, a different path that

allows me to be in a different way. For example, the first time I acknowledged my queerness, my gayness, I did so in English. In my mother tongue and my family's language, I struggled with the idea of expressing that desire and categorizing my sexuality or the subjects of my attraction. Ultimately it felt like sinning, it felt forbidden and unholy, and having grown up Catholic in a very religious society, being queer honestly was not an option. The practice of disidentification brought queerness back into the equation, in a weird contradictory way. Through that practice I was able to negotiate with that which aches: the constriction, the shame, the sadness, and the overwhelming sense of guilt that floods me when I see myself as that uncle I never got to meet, the one who forever hid, was scared, and ultimately could never come to terms with his (homosexual) desires. By disidentifying, I am him, and he is me: we're different and the same, altogether. I avoid the words that probably hurt him, the ones that always connect to his tragedy. Especially in the beginning, those words were unspeakable, so I disidentified with those memories and the faces of sadness often accompanying the voicing of his name. The discomfort ceded when I chose different words, different languages. Then, I was able to move past, but not beyond what I already was. I was able to communicate my desires with myself, accessing a queerness that was – until that point – not even on the horizon.

Learning To Un-learn: Resistencia and Persistencia

This paper has become an exercise in (re)discovering myself, an exercise in self-love and self-affirmation; a desperate plea to find my way back to what I so easily discarded, because even now, as I write this, the pull to suppress and rewrite is strong, and I find myself doubting every word I've just typed. The skills I have acquired follow muscle memory, and against my better judgement I find myself engaging in the act of suppression. It is, after all, a skill that took years to perfect, a skill I crafted with every disappointment, every *burla* and every raised eyebrow. It is a skill I refined on my way home from school as I tried to shake the emptiness from the day just passed. A skill I surrendered myself completely to whenever shame and anxiety crept closer. Such a skill is not easy to dismantle. Like a monster it has grown strong, devouring all the pain I've experienced and now I fear I cannot defeat it.

Often, this fear consumes me, and I find myself stuck at an impasse, unable to move, unable to speak, unable to write, or to *be*. Sometimes the impasse is so strong I shut down and surrender, leaving the paper and the pen, the computer and the keyboard (Cvetkovich, 2012: 19–20). Nonetheless, I carry on. I carry on as my parents did. I carry on as my mother did that day when we arrived in Havana all alone. I carry on and it is this path that speaks of my disobedience. It is the continuous movement of my legs that shows my defiance. And even

though moving forward requires me to show the bruises on my flesh, making me vulnerable to the oppressions I have been fighting, I choose to keep going because – as Anzaldúa reminds me – “[...] vulnerability *can* be the source of our power – if we use it” (Anzaldúa, 2015b: 195). My revenge has become to carry on, and so I do. Against myself and against others I carry on, moving forward while I repeat Anzaldúa’s words like a mantra, “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice [...]. I will have my serpent’s tongue – my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence” (2012: 81).

There is certainly a magical power in making a statement. Mara Lee calls it *den performative kraften i utsagan* (the performative power in an utterance). A performative power that creates a space of possibility (Lee, 2015: 65). This is the power I wield when I write in two or three languages, the performative power that invokes, creates, and destroys at the same time. Where there is no space for people like me, for a writing that is similar to mine, I create my own. I remember Audre Lorde’s words, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (2003: 27), and I feel as if I – finally – can make my own tools and dismantle this house of horrors that haunts me. My moving revenge is also accompanied by the power of *sublimation* (as interpreted by Mara Lee, 2015): the moment when flesh becomes words, words flesh, and together they become something else, something *beyond* (Lee, 2015: 60–61). Then, through what Mara Lee with Julia Kristeva calls, *revolutionary time* – a creative time made for writing, creating, and thinking subjects – I return to the body, acknowledging it without being reduced to it (Lee, 2015: 66–67). This return creates the possibility for my flesh to begin to speak, listen, and transform into something *more* through its literary conception (Lee, 2015: 60–61). Through the process of sublimation, my fear, my shame, my sadness, and anger become matter, taking shape as my fingers type down words. Then, the words become something else, something more, not just illuminating the hidden but also transforming it. Through sublimation I reach the ability to heal, tending to those pains I thought weren’t real, the pains that seemed invisible to the naked eye. As Anzaldúa writes, “wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” (2012: 76), and I can’t help but think that my wild tongue was indeed very close to being amputated, but that against all odds it prevailed, finding in its negation and rejection the strength to exist and resist.

Postlude: Las Cicatrices

“[...] if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language” (Anzaldúa 2012: 81).

As Anzaldúa notes, language is a fundamental part of the subject’s sense of self. For me as a migrant, the inability to speak Swedish perfectly (with fluidity, fitting vocabulary, good pronunciation, and no foreign accent) made it impossible for me to feel like a Swede. Acts of linguistic terrorism amplified my difference and made it even more unreachable to ever image being or feeling like a Swede. To make up for what I lacked, I poured all of my Self into the Swedish language, but it was never enough to allow me to feel at ease with myself in that world. Not wanting to be different, I distanced myself from my mother tongue. Evading it, ignoring it, replacing it. Then, the fear and anxiety born out of my desperation to not feel *different*, to fit in, led me to *El Mundo Mudo*, which imprisoned me with every *burla*, every bad mispronunciation of my name, every comment about my Swedish pronunciation and my *panela*² tainted skin. Refusing to speak I grew further and further apart from my mother tongue. It was as if I had been cutting away pieces of my skin, leaving raw and inflamed red flesh behind. The thing that had always been a constant in my life, my Spanish, connecting me to my birthplace and to my family, was fading away. had become a linguistic orphan of sorts, *homeless in language*, stranded between time and place, no longer certain of my sense of Self.

The liminal place I came to inhabit brought not only destruction but rebirth. No longer bound by earthly rules I began exploring queer temporality, a dimension where the unknowable and unpredictable reign. I began disidentifying, finding coherence in contradiction and the power to heal, aware now and accepting of myself in all my ambiguity and all my queerness. Linguistic mixture evolved from hindrance to possibility, allowing me to move through and beyond linguistic and cultural constraints. In contradiction I found a way to bridge my fears and wants, finally finding a way to reconcile with my queerness.

As a practice of self-love and a (re)discovering of my Self, I have experimented within this essay by using different linguistic and poetic tools to empower my Self. Therefore, as an academic text this essay is defiant, a practice of epistemic disobedience aimed at challenging the structure and language of the academic essay. With its sometimes violent, intense, and deeply emotional language, it seeks to accentuate the difference between the cathartic and the contained, the structured and the chaotic, the academic and the colloquial, inviting the reader to *feel* more than merely *read* the text. This essay seeks to show how poetic

narration and affective language can evoke and capture those very real and nefarious feelings that would otherwise be lost by an impersonal, detached, and

objective language (like the one typical of academic papers). Following Anzaldúa's disidentificatory writing practice, mixing between different languages, and using them as complementary components of a larger system, I seek to challenge normative understandings of languages as closed systems, instead creating the spatial and temporal possibility for a different understanding of them. It is Anzaldúa's constant performance of *disidentification* (whether it be linguistic or social) that allows her to create new possibilities and new spaces, because she simultaneously invokes and enacts a sort of linguistic *borderland*.

It is in this linguistic borderland, borne out of the struggle of women of color feminist writers, that I have found a community, and a way to fully and unapologetically *exist*. By adopting their tools and trying to understand my own situation through their ideas, they have become part of me, and I part of them. Now I feel accompanied in my suffering and struggle. Here in the limbo between languages, between cultures, and between worlds I stay upright with the help of the hands of those who have guided me here. I have found a sense of home among the many other feminist linguistic orphans, like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga. With them I have found community, a sense of belonging in the unbelonging, an *apartness together*, or, as Muñoz calls it, a *feeling-together-in-difference* (2020: 39).

notes

- 1** Queerness is understood throughout this essay as being "outside" societal norms and challenging the status quo (Keeling 2019: 17, 19).
- 2** Unrefined whole cane sugar in solid form, typical in Latin America and derived from the boiling and evaporation of sugarcane juice (Jaffé 2012).

works cited

Alarcón, Norma (1994), "The Theoretical Subject(s) of 'This Bridge Called My Back' and Anglo-American Feminism", *Making Face, Making Soul/Hacienda Caros: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, Gloria Anzaldúa (ed.), San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books: 356–369.

- Anzaldúa, Gloria (2015a), "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers," *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds.), Albany, SUNY Press: 163–172.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria (2015b), "Introduction to El Mundo Zurdo: The Vision," *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds.), Albany, SUNY Press: 195–196.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria (2012), *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books.
- Butler, Judith (2004), *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London/New York, Verso.
- Cvetkovich, Ann (2012), *Depression: A Public Feeling*, London, Duke University Press.
- Jaffé, W.R. (2012), "Health Effects of Non-Centrifugal Sugar (NCS): A Review," *Sugar Tech*, 14: 87–94, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12355-012-0145-1>
- Keeling, Kara (2019), *Queer Times, Black Futures*, New York, NY UP.
- Mignolo, Walter (2009), "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(7–8): 159–181.
- Moraga, Cherrie (2015), "La Güera," *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Moraga and Anzaldúa (eds), Albany, SUNY Press: 22–29.
- Muñoz, José Esteban (1999), *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban (2006), "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31(3): 675–688.
- Muñoz, José Esteban (2020), *The Sense of Brown*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Lee, Mara (2015), *När Andra skriver: Skrivande Som Motstånd, Ansvar Och Tid*, Riga, Glänta Produktion.
- Torres, Lourdes (2017), "Building a Translengua in Latina Lesbian Organizing," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 21(3): 272–288, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2016.1156384>