

Introduction

Anzaldúan Multiplicitous Agency

It is as if one is chopped into many people and cannot bring one's memory of the chopping and of the turns into a memory of philosophical, theoretical, or activist feminisms. The nondiasporic author, of course, can bring continuity to the turns, but cannot make the continuity live in the collective movement of thought, which is what counts.

—María Lugones, “Reading the Nondiasporic from within Diasporas”

For some, multiplicity poses a challenge. Heterogeneity, for example, has been considered the stuff of frustration for Enlightenment and nation-building projects alike. Philosophers have traversed regions of understanding seeking continuity and scope in the midst of nature's apparent chaos, and artists have frantically and faithfully depicted minute details of skin, hair, and longing to offer clarity across forms of peopled existence.¹ Tomes of information have been scrawled in European languages in attempts to render the entirety of an otherwise ostensibly incongruous world into smooth layers of understanding and classification.² In this way, multiplicity has appeared threatening and in need of order. For others, however, multiplicity has been a constant and reassuring glimpse into the promise of the future.³ The flourishing of life has been prefaced on it, and the hope for human social cooperation wrested on the need for diversification.⁴ At times, the maintenance of economic systems and the garnering of profit

from otherwise stagnant markets appears to rely on multiplicity, and, conversely, critics of advanced capitalism, white supremacy, and gender violence note that these forces feed on the driving desire to manipulate the pluralities of existence for the sake of power, wealth, and social control.⁵

Yet, in the mundanity of life for many, including myself, multiplicity has been our home. *Los choques*, contradictions, parallel frames of reference, and incommensurabilities are the stuff of the everyday. Ambling through busy streets, the uneven lapping of water on a shoreline or riverbed, or the sonorous presence of differing dialects, languages, and embodied movements become familiar, expected, and comforting. Likewise, for many, negotiating this multiplicity, which may include wading through unpredictable tempers, unsympathetic stares, or hostile words and actions, is commonplace. Sometimes just making it through the day requires an acknowledgment that a lack of continuity is the norm. Other times, however, there can be revelry in multiplicity, such as the chaotic, cacophonous, or incomprehensible movements and sensations that leave us striving, eager to keep up with the pace of a song or the rhythm of a lover's body. In these moments, unification or exclusion for the sake of regularity may feel impossible, or at the very least, highly undesirable.

This book is about the ebb and flow of varying relations of multiplicity, and about possibilities for action and agency within relations of multiplicity. This book is not, however, an historical survey or sociological engagement with forms of difference. While such work is indeed valuable, this book seeks, instead, to question the sense-making, world-making practices of living within multiplicity. Orienting this thematic around the work of Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942–2004), this book is an attempt to understand what happens when we interpret actions, as she suggests, in “a pluralistic mode” (Anzaldúa 1999, 101). Drawing from an array of Anzaldúa's writings and her readership who have examined the racialized, gendered, and political meanings of multiplicity, this book seeks to understand how context and history combine through action to give rise to new meanings, and how the particularities of a given context are the enabling conditions for action. Specifically, this book develops an account of agency based largely on Anzaldúa's writings and those of her readers called “multiplicitous agency,” which is a model for understanding human action prefaced on shared interactions and

interdependencies, pluralistic forms of valuation, epistemic and hermeneutical modes of distribution, and patterns of coalition building among historically oppressed social groups. As we explore further in the following chapters, multiplicitous agency focuses on themes of movement, rearrangement, and collective forms of orchestration that allow meaningful actions to emerge.

Yet, as María Lugones reminds us in the epigraph above, efforts to understand the collective conditions for action, those pretexts, prefigurations, and perambulations that make an agent's act intelligible, can be hidden or distorted by what is already known. For example, a number of diverse philosophical practitioners have worked to diagnose and address collective forms of nonknowing, indifference, and misperception found within patterned anti-Black and anti-Latinx racisms, sexual and gender violence, ableism, and colonization.⁶ This body of work delves into the high costs of the many attempts to level societal planes of difference and variation. Accordingly, due to such homogenizing practices, multiplicity also makes us vulnerable.

To provide a personal example, having a complicated family migration story and ethnoracial identity are often forms of multiplicity that make one vulnerable to confusion, ambiguity, or misperception. When asked the persistent and nagging question “But where are you *really* from?” or “Are you Latinx?” I often follow up with a brief sentence that rattles off my family's ethnoracial history, including a note about white rural Virginia and three countries in Central America that my interlocutor usually knows little about. Someone once replied to me, for instance, “Panama? Oh, so you must like Van Halen?” Or when mentioning Nicaragua and El Salvador, the birth countries of my grandparents, I have been asked, “Oh, do your grandparents know folk dances?” Rarely do these interlocutors seem curious to know more about the print industry in which my Pápa Juan worked in Central America, or the forms of state censorship that he and his colleagues confronted there. Or that my great-grandmother, Josefa, called the U.S. Marines *los caballos* due to the sounds their boots made as they stomped through her barrio. The leading questions of such curious interlocutors often seem to foreclose the opportunity to tell stories that are important to me, like how my abuela, Tula, was taught to read by Tío Joaquin, a Sandino rebel who fought against the U.S. military in the 1920s. These multiple histories, relations, and experiences are how I know myself, my family, and where I have

come from. Such stories are not the stuff of party-rock anthems or annual cultural fairs, and this information rarely makes me appear any more intelligible to the person who is asking where I am from, why I look the way I do, or why I have an Anglo last name.

This seeming discontinuity for peoples who are seeking an easy narrative may be frustrating or uninteresting to those who are asking such questions, which explains why some have reached for familiar songs or tropes of foreignness such as folkloric dance in their replies. For me, such experiences resonate with Lugones's epigraph above wherein she notes that this kind of multiplicity may feel "as if one is chopped into many people" (Lugones 2014, 21). Perhaps a family, a community, or simply one person feels that they are scattered about, torn apart, or in need of a memory or collective movement of thought that renders that movement intelligible.

In a similar fashion, my gender and sexual identities often fit uncomfortably with white-dominant LGBTQ spaces, spaces that sometimes erase or subsume my understanding of myself and my relationships with others. For instance, on a recent trip to a cosmopolitan city in the United States, a young white trans person who I met at a gender-affirming workout space asked where I lived. When I replied that I lived in North Carolina, their reply was a frown and an apology, stating that they were sorry that I had to live there. This person may have meant that they felt sorry about the state repression that has occurred through legislation like HB2, in which trans and gender variant people were targeted for using public facilities, and in which cities in the state were prevented from raising the minimum wage without broader state approval, and through which antidiscrimination employment protections for LGBTQ people were rejected at a statewide level.⁷ Or, perhaps my interlocutor was referring to the historical and present-day forms of voter suppression that have been stifling Black and Latinx political participation across the state for well over a century.

These are generous readings of the comment, and unfortunately, my sense was that this person considered North Carolina to be a southern U.S. state that was largely uninhabitable for trans and queer people. My sense is that they did not know the many fierce queer and trans organizers of color who have demanded justice across the region. For example, my interlocutor likely did not know much about Pauli Murray's life as a young person growing up in segregated

Durham and their fight against Jim Crow segregation and sexism in the U.S. South. They also likely do not know queer people of the Catawba Nation, like Roo George-Warren, who continue to fight for Native food sovereignty in the Piedmont, or the Latinx organizers who host annual events commemorating the victims of the 2016 Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting, and who throw drag balls in clubs and cultural centers to honor Latinx icons. *This* history of the U.S. South is the one that I am familiar with, one that knows and values the contributions of queer and trans people of color, and that recognizes our role in shaping U.S. southern life and culture. This multiplicitous framing—that knows both repression and fear, as well as resistance, beauty, and community building—fits better with my own understandings of my relationships with the queer and trans people in my life, including the family, friends, and mentors who have supported me throughout my life. In this, I consider people such as my uncle Csar, an out ordained priest in Key West, Florida, who lovingly introduced me to the beauty of queer pop culture as a child by sending me 1980s music videos on VHS tape, which were both a delight and opportunity to relish in the sounds and rhythms of queer Florida culture when I was young. *This* is the multiplicity of relations in which I experience and interpret my gender and sexual identities, and perhaps unlike my frowning interlocutor and against the immensely violent homophobic, transphobic, and racist spaces of the U.S. South, these relations and others have helped me understand and appreciate the complexity of the region.

Regarding Anzaldúa's own gender and sexual relations, she reached for terms like "patlache," "jota," "loca," "Chicana dyke," and "una de las otras" (Anzaldúa 2009, 163). Instead, I experimented with the term "tortillera," which I learned from reading Lugones in graduate school. The term, I felt, at the time marked both the word's play on lesbian identities within Latin American contexts and the long lineage of women in my family who made tortillas by hand, women who know the feeling of grit and *masa* between their fingers. This term was a source for me of what Audre Lorde calls the "erotic as power," and affirmed my existence as a desiring and en fleshed being (Lorde 1984). As "erotic" in Lorde's sense, the term provided me with a sense of power in sharing my conception of joy with other people, including the immense power discovered through food, music, and tactile sensation. Today, I settle on "Latinx," and

for reasons that I explore in this book, my corporeal and affective relations are, in part, affirmed by the ethnoracial, gendered, and sexual complexity of the functions of the “x” in the term. “Latinx,” as an English-language modification of the term “Latina/o” helps me locate myself in my own relations to the swamplands, scrub palmettos, and Latin American–descended populations where my brother, my cousins, and I grew up in what is today Central and South Florida. It also helps me frame my family’s history in relation to the moss, sweetgum trees, and racial and settler colonial violence in what is today rural Virginia, and allows me locate myself in relation to others where I currently live today, on Catawba territory, in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. “Latinx” names and complicates my existence in these places of the U.S. South, as a person descended from migrants who fled the reign of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, traveling across Central America and eventually finding home in Miami, Florida. “Latinx” may also include whiteness, marking the complexity of the multiple racial configurations that exist within Latin American and Latin American-descended communities. In my case, this whiteness is marked by my light skin and straight hair, shaped by my father’s Anglo name and settler colonial lineages of coal miners, school teachers, and middle-class aspirations.

For me, terms like “Latinx” also complicate notions of purity or singularity, as “Latina/o” has never named a unique racial or ethnic category. Instead, as Linda Martín Alcoff has argued (2000), the term refers to a constellation of contextual and historical factors, including relations to various nationalities, races, and cultures. “Social identities,” Alcoff states, “whether racial or ethnic, are dynamic” (2000, 28). For example, in the United States, I am often read as white or as “something else,” and it is largely other people of color who ask about my Latin American ancestry or note that my pronunciation of Spanish-language words is indicative of a potential ethnoracial identity. Yet, when traveling in Panamá, my mother and I were both hailed and recognized as Panamanian Americans, with seemingly little incongruence for the differences between my mother and I in terms of our skin tones, gender presentations, and relative command of the Spanish language. These latter markers of identity seemed to have little bearing on whether our interlocutors considered us bearing relations to Panamá and Central America. With this, “Latinx” is the means I have for naming my own mixed ethnoracial

status and gender identity, and helps me move toward a broader, multiplicitous framing for social identity categories more generally.

Likewise referring to such forms of multiplicity, Latinx feminist authors such as Lugones and Anzaldúa have drawn from a variety of sources to engage in philosophical projects that examine complex forms of heterogeneity. For example, Lugones turns to discourses of “diaspora” when considering questions of belonging and multiplicitous relationality.⁸ As figures within British cultural studies such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall have attested, “diaspora” has been used to describe the constant renewal of meaning of place and homeland for peoples who have been displaced throughout the world. According to Hall (1994), among the communities formed through the violence of the transatlantic slave trade, for example, “diaspora” names the multiplicities in which collective Black life has taken shape among peoples that share in figurations of coherence to the many geopolitical spaces, cultures, and histories stemming from the continent of Africa. As Hall notes when discussing the meaning of *diaspora*, diaspora is “not . . . essence or purity, [but] the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; . . . a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference” (Hall 1994, 235). Diaspora thereby names the multiplicitous and heterogeneous configurations of relations to place and history. Moreover, for Hall, diaspora names a process of becoming and a process of transformation: “Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall 1994, 235). Heterogeneity is thus constitutive of diaspora, according to this discourse.

Lugones, then, in her 2014 essay, probes what kinds of collective meaning-making projects would constitute an understanding of diaspora among Latinxs. Regarding nondiasporic positionalities, Lugones harkens to Emma Pérez’s analysis of Chicanxs as diasporic subjects, as dispersed peoples with relations to a “mythic homeland [that] is longed for, constructed, and rewritten through collective memories” (Pérez 1999, 78). Pérez argues that Chicanxs, through the “‘imagined community’ of Aztlán (which usually refers to the U.S. southwestern territories annexed through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo), are diasporic subjects, intertwined with processes of creation and re-creation that sustain diasporic positionalities” (described in Lugones 2014, 19). Lugones thus agrees with Pérez’s reading

regarding Chicanxs: “The diasporic subject as author is intertwined with the larger action-thinking-dispersed people. It becomes possible, and within movements of thought, necessary to see the movement of their thought and action as not individual” (19). Yet, Lugones continues, all U.S. Latinxs do not constitute such a group, with the same shared histories, collective memories, colonial wounds, or relations to place. Moreover, many people, she argues, “who identify as Latinas are both racialized through a history of colonization and are *nondiasporic* subjects” (19, emphasis added). In this vein, she mentions that while nationally identified groups of Latinxs may spend time together (e.g., Salvadorans, Argentines, or Colombians), these groups, from a hermeneutic standpoint within the United States, may not constitute any shared sets of authorial, political, or normative commitments. Self-identified Chicane authors, however, she suggests, may share in collective relations to place, to Aztlán, to specific social movements against oppression, or to particular forms of labor that employ or impact Mexican American communities.

While Lugones appears to run the risk of homogenizing Chicane communities in her discussion, I do not read her interpretation of diasporic identities as attempting to diminish the vast differences among Chicane communities. Rather, I interpret her as attempting to note that shared hermeneutical resources may exist to *intertwine* the agential positionings of Chicane authors within a broad set of historical and cultural contexts of dispersed Mexican American peoples. To push the point a bit further, she suggests that such shared hermeneutical resources may not exist for other Latinx-identified persons. For instance, despite knowing several other Panamanian American professional philosophers, I cannot yet say that we participate in a collective revisioning of our relations to “the Isthmus,” or that through my shared indignation with other Central Americans about the violence of the United States that stigmatizes, criminalizes, and harms migrants, that I am participating in a *diasporic* Central American project. In this sense, as a discursive community in academia, our multiplicity does not yet cohere through popular collective narratives, histories, or movements, perhaps considered, more generically, under the label “Latinx” feminist philosophers. We are often interpreted as isolated, disunified, or engaged in individualized or individualizing projects. Lugones writes on this point that the

“nondiasporic subject-author is perceived as an individual and as such as not related to a group, not tied to the movement of thought of a group” (Lugones 2014, 20). We may appear to remain between such worlds of collective sense, meaning, or stability, a point that Mariana Ortega (2016), for example, has noted about identifying as Nicaraguan in the United States.

Yet, while there are differences between the histories of, say, Nicaraguan, Panamanian, and Mexican American feminists, there may also be some shared experiences among Latinxs that potentially unite us, such as feelings of *in-betweenness*, to borrow a phrase from Ortega (2016). Namely, the deep analyses of multiplicity among Chicanxs such as Anzaldúa, Pérez, and others are profound articulations of being between worlds of sense. Senses of belonging or participation within a heterogeneous diasporic movement does not stand in contrast to nondiasporic life. Rather, these shared senses of in-betweenness, as both Lugones and Ortega attest, are the conditions for coalition building. They are not necessarily specific relations to the same places or embodied experiences, but rather, that Latinxs “share a nonlinear, dispersed history of dehumanization and of resistances to dehumanization anchored in our ability to exercise a double or multiplicitous vision” (Lugones 2014, 21). Noting a complex interrelatedness, she writes that “we are all dependent on our inhabitation of interstices, liminal places as offering both revelations and cover as we live oppositionally and creatively” (21). Thus, multiplicity, even with its vulnerabilities, makes us collectively able to thrive against efforts that might seek to flatten, conform, exile, or erase us.

When read in this light, this book asks how, in our varying multiplicities, displacements, and forms of creation, we can sustain collective projects of revaluation and resistance. More specifically, this book is interested in interrogating projects of collective meaning-making that do not reify individualism or the tropes of a homogenizing paradigm that seeks uniformity and smooth congruence. The task is to retain multiplicity—be it of existential, epistemic, or normative pluralities—even when the appearance of unification might seem promising. Accordingly, one site by which such a drive toward individualization and fragmentation occurs is in discussions of agency, including linguistic agency. Vast amounts of responsibility are prefaced on what someone says or on how they behave. However, if we

wish to retain life “in a pluralistic mode,” following Anzaldúa, how are we to interpret the actions of multiplicitous agents—linguistic or otherwise?

In this vein, Ortega (2016) has begun a rich dialogue on how multiplicity is experienced, and names some of the problems with agential multiplicity. Ortega notes that the manner in which an ontologically plural set of selves can interact remains unclear. She asks this question in response to some of Lugones’s work (2003), in which Lugones posits an ontological plurality of selves. Ortega asks, in this vein, if we are composed of pluralities, which “self” is able to remember other selves? Which “self” experiences a contradiction or tension between selves? (Ortega 2016, 91–97). Or, as I ask in this book, how do we hold our selves or other selves accountable for harms or pain that we/they might cause *and* retain our multiplicity in that process? As such, the core question in this book is, how do we interpret actions in a multiplicitous manner? In response to these questions, this book explores how we might retain a form of agential multiplicity, and do so in the service of supporting political projects that aim to dismantle racism, settler colonization, ableism, sexism, and other structural oppressions. To carry out such a project, this book picks up from a number of interpretive threads of Anzaldúa scholarship to explore what such an account of multiplicitous agency entails. Specifically, I propose that Latinx feminist theory has provided a set of rich philosophical resources that offer tools to examine questions of agency. In particular, strands of interpretation of Anzaldúa’s work from within existential phenomenology, analyses of her work that explore relational ontology, and readers of her work who develop a coalitional model for political theory, each provide useful framings for my aims here.

More generally, one central reason why Anzaldúa’s work has become so important to philosophers seeking to explore the nature of selfhood is precisely because her work and that of other Latina feminist theorists, as Alcoff notes, have taken a “180-degree turn” away from conceptions of unified and individualist conceptions of selfhood (Alcoff 2019, 1). This turn away from individualism and unification, as we explore in chapter 2, provides a critical strand of pluralist framings of identity, selfhood, and agency. Although Anzaldúa’s writings present a number of beneficial framings for understanding multiplicitous agency, they are, by no means, without

their own problems, and, as such, I hope to explore some of the complexity and transformational potential within her work while retaining the tensions and harms to which her own writings may have contributed. That is, in chapters 4 and 5, I address specific areas of her scholarship on disability, mestizaje, and transness that raise some difficult issues regarding coalitional work. What follows this introduction is a framing of my analysis in the book through three interpretive strands of Anzaldúa's work, each of which allow me to more robustly develop an account of multiplicitous agency. I then conclude chapter 1 by outlining the structure of the book and the contours of my argument.