

Accessing Gloria Anzaldúa Through Utopia

CORDELIA BARRERA

Although scholars have begun to unpack theories and tropes associated with Gloria Anzaldúa's science fictional and speculative works, there is little to no scholarship that develops insight into Anzaldúa's utopian proclivities. I teach a class titled "Utopia/Dystopia," in which I have had great success teaching "La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness" in alignment with three utopian inclinations of the late twentieth century: First, as an example of critical utopianism situated within feminist utopias that underscore process; second, in terms of Ernst Bloch's principle of hope, which considers how subjective visions and daydreams of a better life fuel a potentially transformative political imagination; and finally, as an illustration of idealist philosophies that underscore the revolutionary potential of the mind. A driving force of this chapter is idealist philosophy concerned with questions of consciousness as a construction of the mind and the invisible, transcendent world of thought, imagination, and conceivability—in short, how utopian impulses can trigger changes in the external world. Utopian thinking as social dreaming, or outlines for a better world, that begin in the body and radiate outward appear most potently in feminist narratives that resist closure and focus on changes in consciousness. Thus, when Anzaldúa states that part of the work of the mestiza consciousness is to engender a space—first individual and then communal—that culminates in a vast uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and conceivably the collective consciousness, she is envisioning a future utopian temporality signified by the mutability of the mind and human nature. This inward movement meant to

culminate in external social revolution mirrors models of new societies illustrated in feminist utopian thought. The worlds presented in the works discussed herein reveal how the expansion of human consciousness can encompass ideological programs that improve women's lives while encouraging wider behavioral changes for *all* citizens.

Feminist Utopias: Stretching the Limits of the Imagination

The writings of Gloria Anzaldúa have not typically been read in concert with utopianism or utopian studies. Yet her writing offers a rich resource for utopian critique, especially when approached via engaged pedagogies sustained by feminist and critical classroom practices that stem from strategies related to Paolo Freire's concept of "conscientization" and further articulated by bell hooks as forms of liberatory education that connect "the will to know with the will to become" (hooks 1994, 19). Much of Anzaldúa's writing, specifically "La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness," exemplifies a spiritual ecofeminist perspective that links female oppression in an ecological context that is political and enfolds a spiritual dimension. Her writing in this chapter is one of openness and tension signified by a transformation of both body and mind that ultimately envisions the fomenting and maturation of alternative relations to nature and the natural world. This openness is an entry point for educators to discuss with students how an engaged *will* to foment change can stem from those moments when one begins to think critically about the Self and identity in terms of political and historical circumstance. Feminist utopias like Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean* and Sally Miller Gearhart's *Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* theorize subjectivity while engaging in liberatory missions of both body and mind in ways that compel students to engage alternative strategies of being. These utopias complicate the impulse to social dreaming by creating new psychological shapes that favor interiority, communality, and relationships with the natural world. Because such concepts may seem unconventional, even experimental for many students, it becomes the educator's task to inculcate meaning into the critical examination of vastly different ways of being in the world. For example, in *A Door into Ocean*, female "Sharers" participate in and contribute to a complex system of union with each other and the world in which they live. Practicing nonviolent forms of expression and language in which subject and object are interchangeable, their worldview extends to the ecosystem that nurtures and enfolds them. In *Wanderground*, women know all other women in the society only as mirrors of themselves, and men

are excluded as an entirely different species. Women, however, are connected through telepathy, and there is an organicism, a systemic interdependence with the natural world in which they “become one with the pulsations of nature” (Freibert 1983, 80). Built around the concept of sisterhood, the women are bound by love and examples drawn from the natural world. They learn and grow by not simply understanding but *merging* with the plants, animals, and minerals in their ecosystem. In this collection of interlocked narratives, the women, in a conch-like space called the Cella, are exposed to “earthbreath,” a powerful blast that produces parthenogenesis. It is such an intense experience that they can only survive if enveloped by the other women. Both *Wanderground* and *A Door* illustrate separatist communities, and so they are not entirely unproblematic. However, when students are confronted with fictional characters who have evolved to bend the limits of their human forms to build more just worlds via forms of expanded human consciousness, readers are induced to stretch the limits of *their own* minds. In these novels, the connections forged between women and the natural world—which includes trees, waters, animals, and the soil itself—like the women in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s (2004) utopian classic *Herland*, foreground systems of cooperation rather than control or manipulation. In *Herland*, love, reason, and education fuel a social structure based on an ethical system within a gender-neutral environment in which present-day gender codes related to motherhood are subverted for communal ends. Granted, the arguably essentialist emphasis on mothering in the novel is problematic, but the educator’s task in presenting such works is not merely to critically discuss. Such works can empower both students and facilitators because they don’t merely suggest debate and dialogue but *necessitate* the classroom freedom to engage concepts of gender and power in ways both meaningful and liberatory.

Process-oriented utopian novels by women, such as Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Dorothy Bryant’s *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You*, are open-ended, unlike the above texts, which illustrate closed systems. These novels can be read alongside concepts foregrounded within Anzaldúa’s “La conciencia de la mestiza” for the ways they access utopia in terms of altered states of consciousness and the “power of the mind to trigger fundamental changes in society” (Fancourt 2002, 95). In *The Kin of Ata*, the act of dreaming by the unnamed male protagonist represents an alternative technology in which the dreaming mind signifies a site of utopian change; likewise, *Woman on the Edge of Time* reflects Piercy’s utopian vision via the Chicana protagonist’s—Connie’s—hallucinations. As we will see, Anzaldúa’s altered states of consciousness in “La conciencia de la mestiza” encompass singular perceptions, but like Connie’s visions in *Woman on the Edge* and the protagonist’s in *The Kin of Ata*, Anzaldúa’s hallucinatory revelations enfold the means to access utopian spaces within

the lived moment but with the goal of future social change. The emphasis on psychological experiences and the psychic potential of dreams and hallucinatory states in *Woman on the Edge* and *The Kin of Ata* allows for a reconceptualization of future space in terms of growth, transformation, and process and via a complex negotiation of a priori forms of knowledge. The aspiration to perfect the self in these works reflects a movement inward that is meant to surge outward so as to incite broader behavioral changes among a wider populous. Significantly, such aspirations arise from a lack within the contemporary landscape felt by the principal figures in each text, a key principle of utopian dreaming and a teaching moment for educators and students to engage intersecting points of conflict in the real world.

Utopian Form, Content, and Function

Any discussion of utopia should begin with the difference between form and function. What are some of the historical forms, and how have these changed over the decades? Understanding utopia as process, an inherent device of feminist utopias, necessitates a consideration of the function of utopianism as an exploratory, speculative form. Ruth Levitas, in “For Utopia,” approaches utopia as an expression of a “lack in any given society or culture,” a “heuristic device” by which to explore possibilities or impossibilities in the pursuit of the “good society,” and, finally, in terms of content and its “effects in the world” (Levitas 2001, 26). Approaches that focus on form, or the utopian blueprint, tend to underscore utopian thought as it relates to literary or textual artifacts. Early utopian forms include Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Plato’s *The Republic*, speculative narrative models that depict “more perfect” alternative societies in detail. Darko Suvin provides an early but still-influential definition of the utopia that focuses on form while leaving room for function. He defines utopia as

a literary genre or verbal construction whose necessary and sufficient conditions are *the presence of a particular quasi-human community where socio-political institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized on a more perfect principle than in the author’s community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis.* (Suvin 1988, 35, italics in original)

Conversely, Fátima Vieira discusses utopia in terms of content, form, function, and the desire for a better life, noting that it is the fourth attribute that should be considered most important because it incorporates and is informed by what Bloch, a

principal scholar of utopian expression, considers a key drive in utopian thought: the principle of hope (Bloch 1995, 6). Both Lucy Sargisson and Vieira discuss form-based and content-based utopias as restrictive. For example, content-based approaches are both subjective and finite; they are subjective in that they are based in and reflect individual conceptions of what is desirable or not. In this regard, they represent finite “blueprints” for a given ideal society that has already been reached, hence, the inherent suggestion that there can be no progress or movement forward once the more perfect form has been attained. Both form and content-based approaches negate process, or history, as a process of infinite improvement. Form and content privilege utopian landscapes and societies that have reached a pinnacle of development—social, cultural, biological, or otherwise—in which hope for a better tomorrow is not needed because the ideal society is already in place. *The Wanderground* represents such an example.

However, when we privilege time and social dreaming as fully realizable aspects of historical development—which Vieira suggests transformed literary utopias of the late nineteenth century as they absorbed Marxist thought not as dream or fantasy but as realistically desirable, possibly achievable, future spaces—social transformation can more readily be configured as a process of maturity open and receptive to radically different ways of being and thinking. This reflects an interlinking of feminist theory and practice in which an educator or classroom facilitator might suggest how societal changes can serve as mirrors of individual change and growth. *A Door into Ocean* and *Herland* offer such narratives. Social transformation as a goal sets the stage for what Tom Moylan has described as an ultimate function of utopianism: to “open” the human imagination “beyond present limits” (Moylan 1986, 40). This resonates with Bloch’s idea of the daydream as the principal guiding feature of utopian thinking. José Eduardo Dos Reis writes “Bloch’s philosophy can be traced back to a theory of knowledge that recognizes mental activity as a determining condition for the representation of the empirical world” (Dos Reis 2001, 48). Significantly, the work of Bloch, whose writing encompasses a broad desire for a better, more just world, has been instrumental to the development and deployment of Chicana and Latina utopian thought, as attested by the editors of *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture* (Merla-Watson and Olguín 2017).

Process: Feminist Oppositional Approaches

There has been, and continues to be, much discussion on the form, content, and function of utopia. For our purposes here, and in order for students to embrace

utopianism as process as well as an opportunity to cultivate the validity of personal experience, it is necessary to begin with the form of utopia, as this acknowledges early historical texts such as More's *Utopia* that spotlight utopian blueprints as closed systems already achieved and perfected. Significantly, a "perfect society" is what students usually think of when they encounter the term. This is probably due to both the broad meaning of utopia in popular culture and the term's etymology, which combines the Greek prefix *ou*, meaning "not," and *topos*, which means "place." Because *utopia* in English is pronounced "eutopia," suggesting the Greek prefix *eu*, which translates as "good," the meaning of the term *not place* or *no place* is often conflated with *good place*—a conflation More addresses in *Utopia*. Again, the view of utopia as finite and static is restrictive in that it fails to consider speculative aspects of social dreaming and complexities of process that negate form as a "universalizing function" of desire (Sargisson 1996, 51). Feminist utopias, on the other hand, tend to remain open ended and as such unfold process.

In embracing utopianism as process, I follow Lyman Tower Sargent, who discusses utopia as social dreaming or the projection or interpretation of social values both critical of and more just than the status quo. Ruth Levitas uses the term similarly but expands the definition of utopia as a *desire* for a different and better way of being much like Bloch's utopian impulse and his expression of utopia as the "Not-Yet." Significantly, Bloch's conception of the Not-Yet informs and directs human activity, whereas the Not-Yet-Conscious coalesces the drive that moves the subject toward change. For Bloch, then, utopian proclivities, expressed as wishful thinking, broadly encompass the desire for a better world. Levitas pushes Bloch's wishful thinking further, suggesting that it is not just wishful but "will-full thinking" that manifests most profoundly during periods of revolutionary change (Levitas 1990, 88). Hope and desire, however, are conceptually different, especially when we consider desire as emanating from the body. As such, we can argue that Gloria Anzaldúa's deconstruction of the self in terms of language and history evokes a willed transformation of the body not in terms of aesthetics but as "exploratory projections of alternative values" and the potential for behavioral change (Levitas 2001, 35). The transformative potential of Anzaldúa's mestiza body as a challenge to the existence of a cohesive subject in politically motivated ways has been discussed at length and in critical terms. However, the exploration of such as an alternative state of being that moves beyond the imaginative and subversive to engage concepts that unfold utopian transformation has not.

Sargisson argues that in their open-endedness, feminist oppositional approaches permit conceptual changes as regards alternative states of being that are both subversive and transformative (Sargisson 1996, 51). Function-based feminist utopian

narratives allow for alternative readings of the present in terms of hope and desire, a catalyst for educators to direct student understanding to the impetus to dismantle societal oppressions via an examination of *their own* position within society. Conversely, a conceptual element that informs utopian blueprints sets forth assumed conventions of perfection in ways that present universalizing traits as a function of a better, more perfect world. The drawback of such approaches assumes universal solutions centered in the acceptance of a “fixed human nature” (51). Oppositional approaches question the existence of any cohesive subject alongside a universal “human” nature (read: “male human”). Oppositional approaches align with critical utopianism to critique the ills of contemporary society and provoke social transformation. Sargisson explains: “The critical utopia does not blueprint: social change in process is privileged in the alternative societies it presents. Difference and imperfection are retained” (53). How, then, do we move from one individual who wills a transformation of consciousness to broader collective projects of hope? We look to feminist utopian imaginings that are narratively constructed to provoke shifts in consciousness.

Following from Whitford, Sargisson underscores how feminist utopian novels of the 1970s—works like *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Kin of Ata*—challenge the existence of any cohesive subject in politically motivated ways to explore alternative states of being in imaginative and subversive ways and to transformative effect. The conceptual changes evoked and ultimately permitted in these utopias of process strive to endeavor changes in the present. Indeed, Sargisson suggests a quote from Margaret Whitford as a driving force of *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* as a whole: “Feminist utopian visions, then, are mostly of the dynamic rather than programmatic kind; they do not seek to offer blueprints of an ideal future, still less of the steps to attaining it. They are intended to bring about shifts in consciousness” (Sargisson 1996, 20). As oppositional feminist utopias imagine societies whose consciousness or attitudes toward the natural world have *already* changed, the challenge becomes first to show students how those societies might have achieved such changes toward egalitarianism and second how such changes mirror a goal of feminist pedagogy: the transformation of students themselves from objects to subjects of inquiry.

Euspsychias and Utopian Transformations

Abraham Maslow, the American psychologist best known for creating a hierarchy of human needs, coined the term *euspsychias*, or utopias constructed by the mind, which Donna Fancourt discusses as integral to understanding how feminist utopias

access altered states of consciousness, hallucinatory imaginings, and dreams as “re-visionary” sites of utopian projections (Fancourt 2002, 95–97). Reflecting on mental processes and the power of the mind to activate foundational changes in society, mental utopias focus on the mind as the locus of transformative potential to re-vision space as emanating from the mind’s architecture. Just as the female psyche has often been portrayed as the locus of madness or pathology, feminist utopian thought often subverts this trope to signify the mind as a “space of definition and affirmation of the female” (Komar 1984, 90–91). In her study of literary representations of space, Komar stresses how relational thinking within the internal space of the female mind is conceptualized in literary productions to reveal how narrative representations of women, “long entrenched in the attic spaces of madness,” reemerge from such bouts to declare a “new, relational sense of self” (98). Utopian narratives, affirmed through language, carve spaces for women writers to create “new psychological shapes that displace” (105) hierarchical and patriarchal structures in favor of interior processes that speak to the psychic potential to enact self-transformation and re-vision space.

From the onset of her chapter, “La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness,” Anzaldúa, following José Vasconcelos, proposes the idea that identity—biological, physical, and ideological—is a process. Building on Vasconcelos’s concept of a cosmic race, she pivots, homing in on the psychic restlessness with which mestiza bodies must daily grapple. She positions the mestiza body on the borderlands of different cultures to mark her necessary tolerance for ambiguity. She describes how this inner war, fed and fueled by opposing value systems, is lost, won, or embodied as a truce within an individual’s psyche. She homes in on the mestiza body because, by its very nature, and as a matter of survival, it has learned to operate in a “pluralistic mode” (Anzaldúa [1987] 1999, 101). Her theory of a mestiza consciousness is central to understanding how individuals, mestiza or not, confronted—bombarded even—with incompatible forms of knowledge based in competing and conflicting languages can be jarred, compelled, or driven to reorganize this clash of cultural knowledge such that a “new story[,] . . . a new value system” takes hold (103). She describes the new value system, inherently more complex, as “alchemical,” a “morphogenesis” (103). The imagery here must not be lost on readers. She is conjuring processes that affect biological growth rooted in the concept of neuroplasticity, which is the ability of the brain to change throughout a person’s life span—another entry point for educators to discuss how constructed knowledge can effectively be deconstructed when students are allowed to take control of their own learning.

Dos Reis suggests how Bloch’s philosophy of hope, oriented toward the future, the Not-Yet, and the Possible manifests as “the ultimate utopian state” as the enigma of

being is revealed when one penetrates the darkness of a lived moment that transcends self, time, mind, and space (Dos Reis 2001, 51). It is an “ontological transformation, . . . a sort of epiphanic experience, purely immanent within the structure of the world, in which everything is seen as it truly is” (52). He further discusses the idealism at the heart of the utopian function to characterize the role of the mind as integral to wider spiritual and ethical aspirations extant in utopian thought. He begins his study by establishing an early definition of utopianism. In Joyce Oramel Hertzler’s *The History of Utopian Thought*, first published in 1922, utopianism is defined as “the role of the conscious human will in suggesting a trend of development for society” (quoted in Dos Reis 2001, 44). This idea is further, and arguably fully, described in Bloch’s encyclopedic *Principle of Hope*, which was first translated into English in 1986 and remains a bedrock of utopian process.

Idealist philosophy, which posits the world as a “mental phenomenon ruled by spatial-temporal determination and logical categories” (Dos Reis 2001, 46) reflects a priori forms of knowledge. An approach to utopianism that stresses mental activity as a guiding principle illuminates how utopian thinking registers a state of mind as well as states of time. Utopian conceptualizations represent states of consciousness “with different temporal ramifications, somehow coexisting with other states of consciousness directed toward the representation of the actual state of the world” (49). Utopian thought deploys “coeval, past, or future idealizations” (49) in attempts to improve historical inadequacies and spiritual and ethical aspirations to perfect the self. If utopia is a state of temporality that “results from the will to perfect and live a better life, utopia is, therefore, a state of consciousness with different temporal ramifications somehow coexisting with other states of consciousness directed toward the representation of the actual state of the world” (49). In his discussion of utopia as “mindful awareness of the now,” Dos Reis suggests how, at both personal and collective levels, transformation of the self can drive wider societal change, a concept attuned to a feminist pedagogy.

Coming to Consciousness: Anzaldúa’s Utopianism

Sargisson reminds us that philosophy is “the art of the possible because it is concerned with questions of conceivability,” and she further suggests how utopianism enables us to “repattern and restructure” our thoughts (Sargisson 1996, 229) to egalitarian ends. Utopian thinking is social dreaming that begins in the body and radiates outward; it is most potent in narratives that resist closure. Part of the work

of “La consciencia de la mestiza” revolves around a paradigm shift in consciousness that begins with unearthing language and symbolizing functions that have been relegated to the unconscious by bifurcating practices of institutionalized religion and Western culture. In “La conciencia de la mestiza,” Anzaldúa’s visions directly challenge her conscious experiences to become the means by which she achieves a paradigm shift in consciousness. An understanding of the means by which she achieves such consciousness-shifting mirrors the work to be done in a classroom that engages feminist utopias of process as a means by which students learn the value of taking constructive action when dismantling societal oppressions they are likely not aware of. As Anzaldúa confronts efforts to regain lost or hidden knowledge, signified by the otherworldly serpent, “the creative womb from which all things were born and to which all things return” (Anzaldúa [1987] 1999, 56), she embraces forms of cognition and constructions that emanate from the mind as opposed to culture. Refusing to shake off images and feelings that enfold the numinous, the animal, and “a language that speaks of what is other” (Anzaldúa 2009, 297), she moves beyond yearning to walk the painful path toward “a new story to explain the world[,] . . . a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and the planet” (Anzaldúa [1987] 1999, 103). She illustrates how a new way of being in the world has taken shape, how her body has transformed: “In our very flesh (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. . . . We’ve made some kind of evolutionary step forward” (103). Embracing a mode of consciousness that allows for information and ideas to manifest “from the soul and the unconscious through dreams and the imagination” (59) fomented desire and manifests Other, open-ended, processual realities—key drives within feminist utopian thinking.

What happens when we free ourselves from the determinism of the past, when our present understanding of the world is shaken to its core? Perhaps, as Carol S. Pearson suggests, we “‘step off the edge’ and fall into ourselves and into an alternative utopian world moving outside of concepts of linear time and causality and into the elliptical present of infinite potentiality” (Pearson 1984, 264). Anzaldúa, moving beyond the shame of wounds that split the Self and gashes that censor or erase elemental constructs of identity even before registering in the consciousness, writes, “She has this fear that if she digs into herself she won’t find anyone”; “She has to learn to push their eyes away” (Anzaldúa [1987] 1999, 65). In a world of dualities in which our very language divides us from all that is other, all that lives and breathes within the interstices, we can remain silent. Or, in fear and disquiet, we can deploy and avail ourselves of psychic strategies that endeavor to break the bonds of cultural forms

and practices that continue to persecute, shame, silence, and otherwise neglect Other voices and ways of being in the world. In short, we can take that leap of faith that encourages rebirth and allow ourselves to be devoured. For Anzaldúa this is described in spiritual and arguably, mystic terms; in feminist utopias the creation of future worlds and shifts in consciousness are limited only by the extent of the imagination and an understanding of the present as a drive that moves both subject and society toward egalitarian change.

A feminist pedagogy that encourages reflexivity and personal empowerment that effects change and affirms a subject's right to define and transform one's reality is key to developing necessary connections between "La conciencia de la mestiza" and feminist oppositional utopias. We have been conditioned to censor what we cannot see, what logic will not hold, and so, in the face of new and perhaps disquieting knowledge, we can remain immobile or tread warily within strange, often disconcerting spaces of our mind's creations. To tremble in the face of the unknown, however, and invite the fragments, built of things animal, alien, sub- or superhuman, suggests how we might relinquish control of the Self that culture has compelled us to nurture and emerge vigilant, reborn with our "thousand sleepless serpent eyes blinking in the night, forever open," and be not afraid (Anzaldúa [1987] 1999, 73). It is in this sense that "La conciencia de la mestiza" embeds a discourse of spirituality and ecofeminism that is utopian for its insistence on an alternative way of living and being that surrounds the process of seeking a wholeness that unites spirit and body, rational and irrational, nature and freedom, life and death. Anzaldúa's is a rebirth of consciousness marked by a willed transformation of consciousness. It speaks to the ways that an individual transformation of perception can spur and shape communal visions that access utopia as a tool of liberation and power.

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