

# La indigena: Risky Identity Politics and Decolonial Agency as Indigenous Consciousness

by

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*I am Coatlicue*

*Yo soy Tonantzin*

*I possess the strength of Dos Amades*

*I teach Nahua ollin, I am Maria Josefia Zozaya*

*Y como el arbol, nunca nos falta*

*Do you know me?*

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As a student of color in graduate school, I had an epiphany. Something had been taken from me. In grad school, I learned my people had a history that was different from the history that was written in the hard-back, thick-spine books I was presented with, but neglected, in school. Through the critical historical education I gained in grad school, I realized that traditional public education was a mechanism for control--for jamming European-centered knowledge into my native Latina brain in an attempt to erase my Latinidad and my indigenous past. It was then that I realized that, although my education was meant to colonize my memory and erase my native past, my color would stick with me wherever I went. I became a Latina with a double-consciousness (after reading W. E. B. Dubois and Gloria Anzaldúa), and I knew that I had to adopt a subject position that would empower me despite the lack of fellow Latina students of color. I don't mean a Latina that assimilates into the academy with no real sense of history or purpose, I mean a Chicanx in the 'real' sense—I mean a down-and-dirty, all-out proclaiming Chicanisma, Malinche-infected, Spanish-speaking, and Mestiza-minded Chicanx—one that adopts a stance of resistance in an academy, which attempted to sterilize my mind and make me ivory in the Ivory Tower. Ironically, my skin is light; I should not be considered “colored,” but my graduate education showed me day-by-day that my skin color did not matter. I've checked my light-skin privilege at the doors of critique.

Being a person of color is a constructed position—one that was created hundreds of years ago and, as I learned, has only minimally to do with one's actual skin color. I learned that my last name, like *la Chingada*, would follow me wherever I went. I would forever be a person of color, and learned that I had to fight to free my consciousness from colonial erasures that I and many of my Latina sisters have been subjected to in our public school systems. Finally, I learned, twenty years later, as an educator of color that students of color encounter frequent microaggressions while being forced to negotiate a myriad of imposed and desired subjectivities. This negotiation has its extremes and is undoubtedly affected by colonial processes of dispossession and expansion at the cost of destroying peoples' homelands.

Those who are “illegal” are often also a certain color; they also carry the burden of being a non-person/citizen, while at the same time work in the U.S., pay taxes, and contribute to the backbone of our agricultural economy by working back-breaking jobs that provide sustenance for our nation. When they are fortunate enough to become college students, they are still assumed to be illegal immigrants always treading on the margins, on the edge of opportunity, chance, and, even, death. They are the targets of current anti-immigrant policies such as SB 1070. Illegal students of color are often silenced.

Coloniality has influenced the way we believe, think about the world, and think about ourselves; not only has coloniality influenced our minds, it has also influenced what we ingest into our physical bodies. Colonialism has been unnatural and it, therefore, has made the colonized sick. The sickness I would like to address here today is the disease of singularity and static epistemologies. So, first off, I am shedding that notion, here and now, and delve into that space that allows me to entertain a pluriversal and decolonial consciousness.

As an indigena/Chicanx in higher education, to claim my indigenous roots, linked to the serpent goddess associated with Coatlicue and Tonantzin, is to engage an extremely subversive stance. It is risky identity politics. It is a stance that rejects Westernized, Eurocentric terms altogether, such as Latina, Mexicana, Mexican American, Mexican (unless I pronounce it Meshica), Hispanic, or Chicana. Let one not forget, however, that the trope of Chicanidad embodies the indigena's indigenous consciousness, which seeks to revisit and revitalize the knowledges or (*iximachocayotl*, which is pronounced *esheemachocayotl* and signifies "consciousness" in Nahuatl) and cultural practices of Pre Columbian indigenous peoples in MesoAmerica. Peoples such as the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan--now Mexico City—annihilated by want of land, riches and power, however, left behind priceless, even metaphysical, remnants for those of us here in the U.S. who seek decoloniality of the mind, decolonial agency, and a decolonial consciousness. These terms call upon those of us who claim to be conscious Chicanas to understand the implications of Audre Lorde's quote:

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.



Then how great of a risk are we willing to take to completely claim an alternative, subversive identity that ultimately allows us as "Chicana/Latinas" to create our own tropes for individual and collective agencies in the technology-ridden 21<sup>st</sup> century? In order to answer this complex question, I raise up the trope of La indigena as one of decolonial consciousness

La indigena is a risky trope for many reasons: First, it assumes many static characteristics of the subject who takes on this trope (such as the condition of having to be pure blooded indigena). Second, it is a direct confrontation to that which she has been subjected and exposed to her whole life, namely, Western categories of limiting potentials, ways of being, and ways of knowing that have caused her to feel alienated from her own impure indigenous heritage. In other words, La indigena is risky because it confronts the purist argument of indigenous authenticity and advocacy and rejects the modernist subject positions already imposed upon her that do not allow her to identify with her indigenous, decolonial self. The ultimate risk is, however, one of rejection and this would put her in a third space of being in-between her indigenous and European self; one that is in line with Gloria Anzaldúa's Serpent woman who embraces both death and life while embracing her irrational, spiritual self, which struggles with society's imposition of rational, reasonable, and religious Chicanas.

Other risks for La indigena are as follow:

*She risks being marginalized from the mainstream*

*She risks being ostracized by her own people if she is not indigenous enough*

*She risks invisibility*

*She risks betrayal of her commitment to decoloniality*

*She risks engaging in further static notions of herself*

I would like to address why confronting these risks are a worthwhile endeavor for Chicanas who are developing a decolonial consciousness and suggest that what we already know about risking identity politics will make this process one that is grounded in existing liminal subject positions such as 3<sup>rd</sup> world feminism and the third space, non-space, border identity and border-consciousness(es) or nepantla, La Facultad, and sliding rhetorical tropes, as noted by previous decolonial scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Damían Baca, Adela Licona, Walter Mignolo, and Emma Pérez. So, part of the risk has already been taken and the stage has been set to adopt an identity of decoloniality.

First: What is a decolonial consciousness, and why is this act of risky delinking from traditional identity politics what Mignolo refers to as an act of decolonial epistemic disobedience?

Walter Mignolo names the Bandung Conference as the locale where decolonization originated. He claims that decolonization is not a Western notion or theory. It originated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world. Furthermore, decoloniality is a more recent term, beginning in the early nineties. But, in general, the vocabulary of decolonization/decoloniality came out of the Bandung Conference and has had a significant effect in Africa, South and Southeast Asia, South America (among thinkers of European descent, Indigenous and of Afro-descent), the Caribbean, Native American and Latino/ societies in the US, New Zealand, and Australia. These areas just mentioned are all “geo-historical locations with enduring histories of colonization” (Mignolo). This theory has liberating potential. For example, today, Latinx decolonial thinkers are beginning to reflect on the coloniality of knowledge and the need to decolonize it or, in another expression commonly used, “the Re-Indigenization of knowledge”: a goal that runs parallel to “indigenizing the academy,” which, among Native Americans, is synonymous with the “decolonization of knowledge.” A similar project emerged in Ecuador, under indigenous leadership and the creation of Amawtay Wasi (House of Wisdom), translated in official documents as Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos y Naciones Indigenas de Ecuador (Intercultural University of People and Indigenous Nations of Ecuador) (Mignolo).

Decoloniality, then, is a global economic, intellectual, and spiritual event. For various colonized peoples across the globe, decoloniality works toward the ultimate goal of delinking from economic coloniality such as a capitalist economy within which there can be no peace, equality, or democracy. Of course, epistemic paradigm shifts in consciousness take time, so there are steps to take to achieve a decolonial consciousness tied to one's indigenous past.

First, decolonial scholars need to build knowledge and arguments that supersede the current hegemony of Western knowledge. Fortunately, our antepasados and mentors have begun the process of decoloniality and have worked to continue finding greater opportunities for taking risks that undermine binary logic and static, limiting identifying categories associated with identity politics. Challenging the hegemony of Western knowledge resists the hegemony of capitalism and the State, which has been predicated on economic and geographical development as a condition of freedom and democracy. Hegemonic knowledge has power. It has power, for example, to convince people who are dying of cancer that they are dying because of natural occurrence, when, cancer has been found to be a symptom of capitalist development (i.e. water and soil being polluted with cyanide). It has power to convince those who are rising up to defend their very lives and lands to consider themselves as the "delinquents" of society because they dare to confront modernity and development. This current world dis/order has been provoked by the forces of de-westernization and decolonial responses to Western development. Both are extremely subversive stances and require a backbone to take on in the face of hegemonic, Western ways of being, knowing, and living. The work to break this hegemony is already underway. Border theory has already set the stage for this subversive task. Mignolo knows this and gives Anzaldúa credit for having set the stage for transitions into other spaces for meaning making and living.

So, *La indigena* is in line with border thinking or border epistemology: thinking from non-Western categories of thought through Western-categories of thought. The first step of decolonial "delinking" is to re-inscribe, in contemporary debates and toward the future, social organizations and economic conceptions that were banned and silenced by the progressive discourse of modernity. This discourse is responsible for the current limits imposed by older notions of identity politics that still function to oppress, silence, incarcerate, separate, and even kill those who challenge their colonial sickness.

Current identity politics, then, is symptom of coloniality: a project in producing both inferior and superior peoples. Latinas inherited an inferior subjectivity, and if she holds on to older notions of identity, they call on her to confront two choices: accept the humiliation of being inferior to those who have decided that she is inferior or to assimilate. And to assimilate means that you accept your inferiority and resign yourself to playing the game that is not yours but that has been imposed upon you. And then there is the third option — border thinking/border epistemology and decolonial action.

Engaging an indigena, decolonial position is a type of decolonial action; it is one of the most deepest and liberating forms of agency because decoloniality is a type of alchemy that transforms ancient elements into a new language and, thus, a new way of being in the world, otherwise known as occupying an alternative subject position. Subject positions are either imposed or chosen and if one is conscious of the possibilities of language, this consciousness provides opportunities for individual agency. The agency alchemy that I speak of is the conscious decision to accept an imposed subjectivity or transform it into something else: perhaps something empowering, perhaps something incomprehensible, or perhaps something that is altogether new. So, this is the type of alchemy that I am referring to when thinking of decolonial subject positions. They can be said to be unoriginal and even inauthentic and they are a combination of the old with the new and occupy the border between the two. They are an appropriation of culture and history in reverse historical time: an appropriation of what once was.... This alchemy that I'm discussing is reminiscent of James Baldwin's lamenting of the unofficial status of Black English in, "If Black English isn't a language, then tell me what is?"

Like the African slaves that Baldwin praises, La indigena is refusing to be defined by a language that has NEVER been able to recognize her and that asks her to reject herself. La indigena has chosen to evolve a language in order to describe and, thus, control her circumstances as to not be submerged by a reality that she cannot articulate. This is the language that is associated with the act of decoloniality. It embraces dualisms, contradictions, lost knowledge, and intuitive, spiritual knowledge that once belonged to the goddesses of our indigenous past. And as "a language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey" (Baldwin): in this case—La indigena decolonial subject, which resides in the colonized, diluted-indigena body with an indigena past.

Decoloniality allows one to come to a reconciliation with the past, the pain, the confusion, the cognitive dissonance of abuse and of self-abuse, of neglect, of fear, and division of peoples; and it does not presuppose that the past was perfect, egalitarian or that it was functional, that it was better, or that it consisted of a world order that is more desirable than today in terms of cultural and religious practices. Therefore, it also rejects romantic notions of self.

So, I choose *La indigena*: that which seems to be the most distant and invisible in our field's scholarship and in our U.S. cultural memory. It is also, however, the most subversive, risky, and liberating stance because by claiming *La indigena*, one claims ground zero as the inner core of her being. It is to exist in and insecure space in opposition to Western hegemonic and colonized knowledges and to rely upon her most intuitive, mystical, metaphysical knowledges, and to become one with the universe. La indigena has set me free.....

It has set me free and enables me to perform a critical reversal of the Western normative gaze and articulate a decolonial subjectivity: La indigena in the figurative, third space of the (B)orderlands.

This trope does not concern itself with the authenticity of one's indigeneity or of one's cultural purity or loyalty. It acts as a generative space that is able to support both explorations of and elaborations on one's individual material reality that is attempting to represent conscious, living and breathing history of *La Indigna*, the divine, the impure, the pure, the Goddess, the Spaniard, the oppressor, the Mestiza, the Academic, the mother, the daughter, the sister, and so forth and so on. It can support because it does not negate the simultaneous necessity of essentialism that is strategic for finding a place in the current discourse of modernity. In Emma Perez' essay, "Irigaray's Female Symbolic in the Making of Chicana Lesbian Sitios y Lenguas (Sites and Discourses)"—she defends the need for strategic essentialism as a form of active resistance against dominant ideologies that silence and or mute marginalized groups (97).

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*My transformation as epistemic delinking and as a practice of epistemic disobedience.....*

When I was 21, Chicano Studies and history were liberating and empowering. I knew how I came to be here in Atzlan, and I knew why those of us who identified as Mexican all looked so different. I was proud to be Mexican but always doubted my purity due to my skin and eye color and others' "gueda" comments to the point that I doubted my own genuineness or authentic status as a Mexican American female. As time went on, I continued to question and doubt all of the reading materials that I was given throughout my college career dealing with one racist professor to the next (though, at the time, I was oblivious to it, and the older professors seemed to act like it was their birthright to treat me less than and dismiss my inquiries about absences and silences in the literature (both and academic and literary)). My only recourse was to embrace a position of eternal inquiry until I figured out that I was outright ignored in the majority of the scholarship that I encountered, and not only was I absent, my whole entire cultural group was absent.

When I was 31, I was still alone in the academy, and when my colleague decided to write about colorism in 1998, she was ostracized and looked at with disdain. What in the world was she talking/writing/researching? Was it a legitimate research problem: this problem of colorism? She was, indeed, ahead of her time and now I call her a visionary who was not afraid of alienation, not afraid of ostracism, and not afraid of communicating that which haunted her from the moment she could understand what the color of her skin meant and why, as a young caramel complected girl, her mom slathered her face with bleaching cream so she could be better liked by her peers. I always had light-skin and I understood, from a different, angle what the implications of skin color were. I was alienated by my own people--ostracized from my own people; my legitimacy was questioned, and my identity was in constant flux because I was unclear as to why my skin color meant access to some people and disdain to others.

Nevertheless, I became indifferent to my skin-color and only aspired to find out why alterity in my course of study was only saved for specially designated “ethnic courses” or especially designated to be discussed as serious scholarly material only at the end of the syllabus: only at the end of the semester when OTHER voices could finally be considered. My subject position is, thus, a product of colonialism; it is only recently (within the past 7 years) that I have to come to know that the parts that I was never allowed to explore, express, and exhale were those parts that colonization silenced within me. It had taken 30 plus years to colonize my mind, I thought, how long will it take to decolonize my mind, my being, my worldview, my eating habits, my religious beliefs, and my 20 plus years of education.

I imagine that many Latinas feel the way I do: betrayed, lost, alienated, and disempowered. I have to say, however, the my individual process of decolonization began before I knew what decolonization meant, thus, the word allows me and others to express that which we have inherently felt for centuries; for it is said that our genetics, in the form of DNA, carry cultural memory. For those of us who claim *La indigena* as our trope for being Latina and educated, that cultural memory carries an enormous amount of trauma. It carries with it a modern-day diagnosis called PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) that is doubly, triply compounded by the cultural erasure and challenges to our own proposed attempts at creating and disseminating our own epistemologies; so, no wonder we are often type-casted as angry Latinas; we have a whole hell of a lot to be angry about. So meet *La Indgina* and occupy a disobedient subject position that is derived from gaining a decolonial consciousness.

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