

Research Essay

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Systems of domination depend not only on overt violence but on the creation and maintenance of geographic, social, psychic, and bodily borders. These borders determine who belongs and who does not, whose lives are valued and whose are disposable, and which identities are understood within dominant regimes of power. From colonial land theft to prisons, immigration enforcement, and compulsory gender conformity, borders operate as technologies of control that regulate bodies, behaviors, and desires. Feminist theory, particular feminist theory rooted in the experiences of women of color, provides critical tools for understanding how these systems function together rather than in isolation.

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* offers one of the most generative frameworks for analyzing domination as a process of border-making. Writing from the embodied experience of the U.S.-Mexico border, Anzaldúa theorizes colonial logics as systems that fracture identities, impose rigid binaries, and demand self-policing from the colonized. In "'The Atlas of Our Skin and Bone and Blood:' Disability, Ablenationalism, and the War on Drugs," Andrea Pitts argues that this is accomplished by "creating patterns of exceptionalism that deem specific populations as 'undeserving,' 'untrustworthy,' or 'corrupt.'" Borders, for Anzaldúa, are not merely lines on a map but violent structures that shape consciousness, culture, and gender. Her concept of borderlands exposes the degree to which

colonialism relies on instability and contradiction while presenting itself as natural and inevitable.

When read alongside Kayla M. Martensen and Beth E. Richie's analysis of carceral logics, Angela Y. Davis's abolitionist feminism, and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and normativity, Anzaldúa's work reveals its broader implications. Carceral systems extend colonial border-making into prisons, policing, welfare systems, and immigration regimes. Gender norms function as another border—one that disciplines bodies through compulsory heterosexuality and binary classification. Together, colonial, carceral, and gendered logics mutually reinforce one another and therefore produce racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects who are continuously surveilled and regulated. Anzaldúa's theory of colonial logics provides the foundation for understanding the ways in which borders, prisons, and gender norms operate as interlocking systems of policing and that domination is sustained through boundary enforcement, internalized discipline, and the normalization of violence. A feminist, decolonial abolitionist approach, rooted in Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness, is necessary to dismantle these intertwined systems and imagine forms of life beyond borders, prisons, and compulsory gender conformity.

Rather than treating colonialism as a historical backdrop, Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes it as a living epistemology that organizes the ways that space, identity, and value are produced and policed. This aligns with Margaret Ramirez's understanding of borders as "roving entities that spatially and racially mark certain lives as 'illegal,'" as she argues in "City as Borderland: Gentrification and the Policing of Black and Latinx Geographies in Oakland." In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, colonial logics appear not simply in territorial conquest but in the everyday practices through which bodies are classified, cultures are hierarchized, and difference

is policed. This section closely examines Anzaldúa's conceptualization of colonial logics as processes of border-making that operate simultaneously at the material, psychic, and symbolic levels. Analyzing her accounts of borderlands, internalized domination, and imposed gender norms establishes the ways in which colonial power functions as a system of regulation that precedes and enables later carceral and gendered regimes of control.

Anzaldúa situates colonialism as an ongoing structure that organizes space, power, and belonging. Central to this structure is the border, which she theorizes as both a material and symbolic apparatus produced through conquest, dispossession, and exploitation. Emphasizing that borders function to protect dominant interests while rendering others vulnerable and expendable, Anzaldúa writes, "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them" (16-17). The border is thus not a neutral dividing line but a technology of power that produces racialized hierarchies and legitimizes violence in the name of order, security, and civilization.

Anzaldúa's historical analysis of the U.S.-Mexico border reveals the degree to which colonial expansion extends beyond territorial seizure into economic domination and dependency. "*Los gringos* had not stopped at the border," Anzaldúa writes, explaining that U.S. colonization involved the systematic dispossession of Indigenous land through partnerships between U.S. corporations and Mexican elites which resulted in the loss of land, labor, and autonomy for millions of Mexican citizens (27). Colonial borders function, therefore, as mechanisms for extraction that organize who may move freely and who may be exploited. The borderland becomes a contradictory space in that it is heavily surveilled and criminalized and yet economically necessary to the very systems that police it. This contradiction exposes colonial borders as sites of sustained violence rather than resolved national boundaries.

Anzaldúa expands the concept of the border beyond geography in describing the borderland as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (16-17). Colonial borders fracture not only land but subjectivity itself and produce psychic and cultural wounds that persist across generations. This internal fragmentation is intensified by ethnocentrism, which Anzaldúa describes as “the tyranny of Western aesthetics” (121). Through this process, Indigenous and non-Western cultural forms are stripped of their spiritual and political significance and transformed into inert objects. What is lost is not only meaning but power, as culture becomes “a conquered thing, a dead ‘thing’ separated from nature and, therefore, its power” (121). Colonial domination thus operates as a process of de-animation, rendering colonized people spiritually, culturally, and politically inert. These psychic borders are maintained through internalized colonialism, in which subjects are compelled to police themselves. As Anzaldúa explains, “the borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behaviors; these habits are the enemy within” (136). Colonial power thus reproduces itself through shame, fear, and self-surveillance thus transforming external domination into internal policing. This logic is reinforced through narratives that, as Andrea Pitts notes in “‘The Atlas of Our Skin and Bone and Blood:’ Disability, Ablenationalism, and the War on Drugs” , “see ‘all the ways our bodies are made wrong, held responsible for our own mistreatment, blamed for showing the impact of oppression, all the ways our nature is called defective’ as connected and ‘rooted in the same terrible notions about what is of value,’” thus transforming structural violence into individual failure.

Gender emerges as a central site through which this internalized policing is enforced and gender roles become mechanisms of obedience, thus reinforcing colonial authority by linking respectability to submission. In underscoring that borders are not only territorial but deeply

personal, Anzaldúa writes “[t]he struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders is our reality” (*Borderlands*, 113). In this way, gender functions as another border, one that disciplines behavior and punishes deviation in the name of tradition and morality. Anzaldúa’s analysis anticipates later feminist theories of gender normativity by revealing how colonial power depends on rigid gender conformity as part of its broader project of cultural domination.

Anzaldúa’s theory of colonial logics demonstrates that borders function as technologies of domination that discipline bodies and identities while presenting themselves as natural and inevitable. Through her analysis of internalized colonialism, imposed gender norms, and cultural fragmentation, Anzaldúa displays the degree to which colonial power reproduces itself through both external enforcement and self-surveillance. At the same time, her concept of *mestiza* consciousness gestures toward modes of resistance that refuse binary thinking and destabilize colonial categories. This understanding of colonial border-making provides the critical groundwork for examining how similar logics reappear in contemporary carceral systems, where surveillance and punishment extend colonial forms of control into new institutional contexts.

Building on Gloria Anzaldúa’s analysis of colonial border-making, this section turns to contemporary carceral theory to examine the ways that systems of surveillance and punishment reproduce colonial logics within modern institutions. In “Prison Abolition,” Kayla M. Martensen and Beth E. Richie’s articulation of carceral logics reveals that the prison and its extensions function as mechanisms of social control that categorize certain populations as dangerous, deviant, or disposable. When viewed through Anzaldúa’s framework, carcerality emerges another form of border-making that sorts populations into categories of deserving and undeserving, legal and illegal, normal and deviant. Angela Y. Davis’s abolitionist feminism further expands this analysis by situating prisons within interlocking systems of racism, capitalism, militarism, and

gender violence and insisting that abolition must address the underlying logics that make carcerality appear necessary in the first place.

Martensen and Richie define carceral logics as the governing belief that social order requires the control, surveillance, and punishment of populations deemed threatening or deviant. They argue that, “Carceral Logic tells the narrative that certain people need to be under the control and surveillance of the state” (Martensen & Richie, 12). This logic mirrors colonial border-making by producing categories of dangerousness and disposability that justify state violence. Much like colonial borders, carceral boundaries separate those imagined as deserving of protection from those marked for containment which transforms inequality into a matter of security and punishment rather than just structural harm.

Carceral systems are deeply racialized and gendered, disproportionately targeting people of color, queer and trans people, immigrants, particularly those that are undocumented, and disabled people. Within prisons, bodies are rigidly classified and regulated according to cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions thus making gender nonconformity a punishable offense. This enforcement of normative identities echoes Anzaldúa’s analysis of colonial domination, in which deviation from imposed cultural and gender norms is met with punishment and shame. Martensen and Richie further emphasize that the prison extends far beyond its physical walls: “the prison existed before the physical buildings” and will persist unless its supporting structures are dismantled (5-6). Immigration enforcement, welfare systems, schools, and urban policing function as extended carceral spaces that regulate race, gender, and behavior in ways strikingly similar to colonial border enforcement. This reality highlights the need to acknowledge and “dismantle white supremacy, settler colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other oppressive structures that function through the prison state” (Martensen & Richie, 11).

Angela Y. Davis's abolitionist feminism expands this analysis by situating carcerality within interlocking systems of racism, capitalism, militarism, and gender violence. In *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, Davis insists that abolition must address not only prison themselves but the conditions that make them appear necessary, warning that "you could remove the chains, but if you did not develop the institutions...then slavery would not be abolished" (69). Davis explicitly links prison abolition to gender liberation in arguing that prison abolition "embrace[s] the abolition of gender policing" (197). This insistence aligns directly with Anzaldúa's call to uproot binary and hierarchical thinking by emphasizing that true liberation requires dismantling the foundational logics of domination rather than reforming their most visible institutions.

Together, Martensen and Richie, along with Davis, demonstrate that carceral systems operate through the same foundational logics Anzaldúa identifies in colonial domination through the enforcement of boundaries, the normalization of surveillance, and the violence inflicted against those who transgress imposed norms and are thus deemed threatening to social order. By showing that the prison extends far beyond its physical walls and is sustained by racialized and gendered assumptions, these abolitionist frameworks reveal carcerality as a systematic and enduring structure of domination. Davis's insistence that prison abolitionists recognize the harm of gender policing resonates directly with Anzaldúa's call to dismantle binary thinking and hierarchical categories. Read in concert, these theorists similarly argue that liberation cannot be achieved through reform or assimilation, but only through a transformative abolitionist project that dismantles the colonial, carceral, and gender logics organizing social life.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a crucial lens for understanding gender as a regulatory system enforced through social norms, sanctions, and violence. Butler argues that gender is not an innate identity but a compulsory practice that produces distinctly

gendered subjects while portraying those who fall outside those norms as incomprehensible and/or disposable. When placed in conversation with Anzaldúa, Butler's work illuminates gender as another form of border-making, one that polices bodies and desires in ways deeply entangled with colonial and carceral power. This section examines the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender function as disciplinary regimes that parallel the enforcement of national borders and prisons.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a critical framework for understanding gender as a regulatory system produced through repetition, reinforcement, and constraint rather than innate identity. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler argues that "the practice by which gendering occurs...is a compulsory practice, a forcible production" (218), emphasizing that gender norms operate as punitive regimes. These norms compel individuals to embody socially sanctioned forms of masculinity and femininity while punishing deviation through shame, exclusion, and violence "to preserve...borders, real and imaginary" (*Undoing Gender*, 231). Gender, in this sense, functions not as expression but as regulation that determines which bodies are able to be understood by larger society, legitimate, and worthy of protection.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler makes this regulatory function explicit by framing gender as a border concept. Those who fall outside normative gender categories are rendered "unreal," positioned as "the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality" (30). This formulation resonates strongly with Anzaldúa's theorization of borderlands as spaces of instability, contradiction, and exclusion produced by unnatural boundaries. Just as colonial borders define who belongs and who does not, gender norms delineate the limits of the human, casting gender-nonconforming subjects as threats to social coherence. Gender thus operates as an internalized border, one that structures subjectivity through fear of punishment and loss of recognition.

Carceral institutions make this gendered border-making materially visible through rigid classification systems and the policing of trans and gender-nonconforming bodies. Prisons enforce binary gender categories through housing assignments, surveillance, and retaliatory practices that punish those who fail to conform. This enforcement reflects the same colonial impulse Anzaldúa critiques which is the drive to stabilize identity through rigid categorization in order to maintain control. Read alongside Anzaldúa, Butler's analysis reveals gender normativity as a carceral and colonial technology that polices bodies, enforces boundaries, and sustains broader systems of domination.

Butler's analysis of gender normativity clarifies the ways in which the policing of gender operates as a mechanism of social control that sustains broader systems of domination. By framing gender as a border that secures the boundaries of human expression, Butler echoes Anzaldúa's depiction of borderlands as sites of exclusion and struggle. Gender nonconformity becomes a punishable transgression, enforced through both institutional violence and internalized policing and fear. This understanding of gender as a regulatory and carceral system prepares the ground for a comparative analysis of colonial, carceral, and gendered logics thus revealing their shared reliance on boundary-making and retaliation.

Bringing together the preceding analyses of colonial logics, carceral systems and gender normativity reveals an interlocking structure organized through boundary-making and discipline. Drawing primarily on Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of borders, this section synthesizes insights from Judith Butler, Angela Y. Davis, and Martensen and Richie to demonstrate how colonial, carceral, and gendered logics mutually reinforce one another in the regulation of marginalized bodies. Borders, whether territorial, institutional, or embodied, function as sites where power categorizes, contains, and normalizes violence against those deemed deviant or disposable. By

situating these systems in relation to one another, this section articulates a feminist, decolonial abolitionist framework capable of dismantling their shared foundations.

Colonial, carceral, and gendered logics operate together as interlocking systems of policing that regulate bodies and identities. Gloria Anzaldúa's work reveals the ways in which borders, both external and internal, structure domination by demanding self-surveillance from marginalized subjects and enforcing rigid divisions of belonging. In *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes that "[t]oday, the division between the majority of 'us' and 'them' is still intact. We are *nos/otras*. This country does not want to acknowledge its walls—its limits, the places some people are stopped or stop themselves, the lines they are not allowed to cross" (81). When read alongside Martensen and Richie's analysis of carceral logics, Angela Y. Davis's abolitionist feminism, and Judith Butler's theorization of gender normativity, Anzaldúa's theoretical framework exposes the deep interconnections between colonialism, imprisonment, and compulsory gender conformity. Together, these theories offer not only critique but a transformative methodology for resistance. Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness, with its rejection of binary thinking and embrace of contradiction, disrupts the epistemological logics that sustain colonial borders, carceral punishment, and normative gender regimes. Abolition thus becomes inseparable from the undoing of gender and the dismantling of internalized policing, demanding new forms of social organization grounded in care, accountability, and collective survival. Rather than seeking inclusion within existing categories, a feminist, decolonial abolitionist framework rooted in *mestiza* consciousness insists on dismantling the borders themselves, thus imagining modes of life beyond prisons, borders, and compulsory gender norms, toward collective liberation.

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