The Art of the Safe House

By Elizabeth Watkins

In her essay, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt defines the contact zone as “[…] social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical power […]” (Pratt 575). It can be a dangerous place, where people are easily misunderstood and hurt. It can also be a place of mutual understanding, new wisdom, and the wonder that comes when people learn from each other. Because the contact zone is so unpredictable, Pratt also talks about the need for places where people can retreat from the contact zone and feel safe. She calls these places “safe houses” and uses the term to “[…] refer to social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (Pratt 586). However, this idea of “safe houses” is not unique to Pratt. Gloria Anzaldúa is an American Chicano writer, whose essay, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”, also implies the need for places of shared understanding. Anzaldúa and Pratt both recognize the need for safe houses. However, Pratt believes that they can be formed inherently within a culture, and so fails to recognize their complexities, where as, Anzaldúa takes these complexities into account, and would argue that a common cultural heritage does not inherently create a safe house.

In her essay, Pratt describes the contact zone as being a place of many emotions. It is a dangerous place, where people can get hurt and miscomprehension is common. She talks about the, “rage, incomprehension, and pain,” of the contact zone, but she also mentions the “moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom” that can also occur in the contact zone (Pratt 586). Because the contact zone is a place of such emotional turmoil, Pratt also stresses the need for “safe houses.” She states that after being in the contact zone, “[…] groups need places for hearing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone” (Pratt 587). Safe houses are places where a person can be with people they share an identity with. People can go there and not feel threatened, and may share their experience within the contact zone with those who can empathize and have had similar experiences. Being in a safe house can reaffirm who you are, so you have the strength to go back into the contact zone, certain of what you represent. Safe houses give people a place to work out and understand things in a safe environment.

One could argue that Gloria Anzaldúa is a product of the contact zone, a combination of two cultures. She comes from what she calls “the borderlands.” When describing herself, she says, “I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican boarder, and others, all my life” (“Preface”). She understands the complexities of the contact zone because she lives with them everyday of her life. In her essay, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” she talks about the experience of the contact zone through language in modern America. She tells us that, “[e]thnic identity is twin to linguistic identity” and even goes so far to say that “I am my language” (“How to Tame” 46). She sees linguistic heritage as the same as cultural heritage. For Anzaldúa, they are inseparable. Anzaldúa speaks what she calls Chicano Spanish, or Tex-Mex, as her native tongue. Chicano Spanish is not Standard Mexican Spanish. It developed, “after 250 years of Spanish/Anglo colonization” and has many differences from Standard Spanish, which she describes in her essay (Anzaldúa 44). For example, some words from Spanish have been distorted by English, causing Chicano Spanish to sometimes be called "Spanglish" (Anzaldúa 45). Because this language is not entirely Spanish or English, Anzaldúa finds herself at odds with both communities. While talking about her experience, Anzaldúa implies the need for a space similar to the one Pratt talks about, a "safe house". She says that "[u]ntil [she] can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, and all the other languages [she] speak[s], [she] cannot accept the legitimacy of [her]self" (Anzaldúa 46). Anzaldúa needs to have her language (and so her cultural identity) legitimized in order to be able to fully accept herself. She needs a place where she is accepted as she is, a safe house.

Pratt seems to take it for granted that a safe house exists where those people of a similar background come together. She makes no mention of needing to find or create a safe house, simply that they are needed where there are legacies of subordination (Pratt 587). It almost seems as if safe houses are an after thought in her essay. She introduces the concept in a small paragraph that is second to last in her essay. She states that they are important, and are needed, but seems to take it for granted that they will be there for people who are caught in the contact zone. Anzaldúa also feels that safe houses are important, but she points out in her essay the problems involved in finding them. She states that in the case of Chicanos, "our language has been used against us by the dominate culture, [and] we use our language differences against each other" (Anzaldúa 45). She talks about how her own people have not yet learned how to be a safe house for each other. She uses the example of how "Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation" (Anzaldúa 45). She notes that, "[e]ven among Chicanas we tend to speak English at parties or conferences" (Anzaldúa 46). In this way, she shows how she doesn't have a safe house among her own people. Even her own mother was not really a safe house for her linguistic and cultural identity, for her mother was "mortified that [she] spoke English like a Mexican" (Anzaldúa 41). The common heritage and language shared by all of her people is not enough to form a safe house.

Anzaldúa then addresses the question of why she cannot find a safe house within her own people. She realizes that, "[t]o be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we'll see there. *Pena*. Shame" (Anzaldúa 46). This shame ultimately comes from always being told that her language, and so her culture is wrong. She is told this both by her own community as well as the dominant culture. She notes that, "in childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self" (Anzaldúa 46). She remembers being punished in elementary school for speaking Spanish at recess, because her language was not accepted by the dominant Anglo culture controlling the school (Anzaldúa 41). However, she also recalls being called a "cultural traitor" by other Latinos and Latinas for speaking English. Her native language, Chicano Spanish, is, "considered by the purist and by most Latinos deficient, a mutilation of Spanish" (Anzaldúa 42). So she cannot linguistically fit into either culture, for they both see her own language as "wrong" in some way. Because Anzaldúa views cultural identity as the same as linguistic identity, she feels this rejection of her language is also a rejection of herself and her culture. It is this sort of oppression on all sides that causes the "Shame" she refers to.

In her essay, Pratt uses the concept of safe houses as evidence for why universities should not seek to replace ethnic or women's studies with other classes (Pratt 586). She states that these classes are safe houses, and as so, need to be protected. Anzaldúa points out that merely bringing people of similar background together may not be enough to form a safe house. However, Pratt would still stand by her support of ethnic and women's studies even after taking Anzaldúa's argument into account. While Pratt may no longer view these classes as "complete" safe houses, she would argue that they still offer some, if not complete, protection from the contact zone. In this case, Pratt would argue that some protection is better than none. She would also point out that while Anzaldúa's experiences shed important new light on the idea of safe houses, they are only the experience of one woman in one culture, and it can't be assumed that she speaks for all those who are in need of a safe house.

While both Pratt and Anzaldúa talk about safe houses and the need for them, Anzaldúa seems to have a deeper understanding of what it takes to make and maintain a safe house. Pratt seems to take them for granted almost, where as Anzaldúa must deal with the problems of not having one. Because Pratt assumes that sharing a common cultural background with a group will inherently create a safe house, she underestimates the complexities that can arise within one culture in and of itself. In this case, some of the complexities that prevent Chicanos from forming a safe house are a product of the contact zone itself. The pressure put on Chicanos from both sides of this "cultural clash" can make them feel that they do not belong to either the Spanish or the Anglo culture. As Anzaldúa states in her essay, "we don't identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness of Angloness" (Anzaldúa 50). This dual identity causes conflict within the Chicano culture to the point where Anzaldúa says, "sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one" (Anzaldúa 50). Pratt's essay does not recognize the far reaching effect of the contact zone into this culture's very heart. For Chicanos, "the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of boarders is our reality still" (Anzaldúa 50). By the recognition of this dilemma Anzaldúa recognizes the complex reality of the safe house, and takes our own understanding of it to a new level.

Works Cited

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