

*A Process Metaphysics and Lived Experience Analysis of Chicanxs, Spanglish, Mexicans and Mexicanidad**

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*In the conclusion to “A World of Pure Experience” (1904), William James writes, “experience grows by its edges.” I explore what this may mean vis-à-vis Chicanx culture and Spanglish to argue that Chicanxs are neither a bastardization of Anglo or Mexican people and culture, nor is Spanglish a bastardization of English or Español, and that in some ways Chicanxs feel their Mexicanidad more palpably than Mexicans who live in the interior of Mexico, where one’s Mexicanidad is not a predominant identifier. I first explain the process metaphysics that James espouses as well as his view of the lived experience. I build on these two Jamesian concepts and work with the chapter “The Pachuco and Other Extremes” from Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), as well as Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) to explore the experience of being a Chicana and speaking Spanglish on the U.S-Mexico border.*

Key words: Chicanxs; Spanglish; Octavio Paz; Gloria Anzaldúa; Latin American Philosophy

In the conclusion to “A World of Pure Experience” (1904), William James writes, “experience grows by its edges” (James 1967: 212).¹ I explain the process metaphysics that James espouses to argue that Chicanx culture and Spanglish are neither a bastardization of Anglo or Mexican people and culture, nor is Spanglish a bastardization of English or Español. I also work with James’ explanation of the lived experience to make the claim that in some ways Chicanxs feel their Mexicanidad more palpably than Mexicans who live in the interior of Mexico where a person’s Mexicanidad is not the predominant identifier.

I build on these two Jamesian concepts and work with the chapter “The Pachuco and Other Extremes” from Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), as well as Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) and *Light In The Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro* (2015) to explore the experience of being a Chicana and speaking Spanglish on the U.S-Mexico border. Given the recent and continued affronts against teaching Chicanx history in Arizona’s public schools,² and that Chicanx culture is being adopted world-wide as a culture of resistance,³ it becomes increasingly important to learn about Chicanx history and philosophy.

1 Process Metaphysics and the Lived Experience

Process metaphysics emphasizes the process of becoming and perishing as having the same ontological value as that of being.⁴ A process metaphysics is best contrasted with substance metaphysics, which assumes that what is ultimately real are substances with an unchanging

essence. By comparison, a process metaphysics ascribes the same ontological value to change as to permanence; this means that what is changing and what stays the same are both equally real. James writes:

According to my view, experience as a whole is a process in time, whereby innumerable particular terms lapse and are superseded by others that follow upon them by transitions which, whether disjunctive or conjunctive in content, are themselves experiences, and must in general be accounted at least as real as the terms which they relate [...]. Some experiences simply abolish their predecessors without continuing them in any way. Others are felt to increase or to enlarge their meaning, to carry out their purpose, or to bring us nearer to their goal. They ‘represent’ them, and may fulfill their function better than they fulfilled it themselves (James 1967: 203).

In a previously published piece on process metaphysics, I discuss how James compares the flow of experience to the activity of birds. James tells us how “life is an alternation of flights and perchings” (James 1967: 36). Experience is encompassed by both moments of rest and moments of transition, or as James calls them, substantive moments and transitive moments. The substantive moment is for James not a static substance as such, but only a moment in the process of becoming.⁵ Process metaphysics is not an obscure theory. Besides William James, other philosophers who have espoused process metaphysics are Heraclitus, Henri Bergson, John Dewey, Alfred N. Whitehead, G.W.F. Hegel, Lao Tzu, Buddhism, and the Aztecs. Although they each articulate their versions of process metaphysics differently, they all agree on the centrality of change.

The second Jamesian concept I work with is that of “the lived experience,” which is for James the bottom line regarding one’s authority when speaking about any experience. In a previous publication on the “Lived Experience,” I discussed how, as a pragmatist, James distinguishes his Radical Empiricism from the empiricism of the modern philosophers by emphasizing the primacy of unobstructed experience.⁶ By unobstructed, James means the experience itself and not the experience that is theorized about. Experience is primordial for James. He describes experience as an *unqualified actuality*, a *simple that*. Traditional empiricism is already an abstraction from experience; it is a theory about experience.

James’ view of the lived experience dovetails with phenomenology since phenomenology considers things to be already there, before reflection begins—a world exists previous to our theoretical reflections of it. In other words, both schools of thought, pragmatism and phenomenology, agree that there is a difference between the way in which we immediately experience things—the lived experience—and a theoretical stepping back to reflect upon such experiences.

To further illuminate what the lived experience means for James, I take the following quote from his essay “What Makes A Life Significant:”

Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And which has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Which has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill’s existence, as a fact? Is he in excess, being in this matter a maniac? Or are we in defect, being victims of a pathological anesthesia as regards Jill’s magical importance? Surely the latter; surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed; surely poor Jill’s palpitating

little life-throbs *are* among the wonders of creation, *are* worthy of his sympathetic interest; and it is to our shame that the rest of us cannot feel like Jack. For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not (James 1967: 645).

With this analogy, James asks his readers, who may have the ultimate truth regarding Jill: us, the stolid onlookers who have no relationship whatsoever to Jill, or Jack, Jill's beloved?

James believes it is Jack who has the deepest insight into Jill's nature, for it is he who "realizes Jill concretely, and we do not." This is because in this instance, we, the stolid onlookers, are twice removed from Jack's lived experience of Jill. In other words, our experience of Jack's experience of Jill is secondhand. Jack realizes Jill concretely, he has the lived experience of Jill, while we, the stolid onlookers, only second-handedly understand the significance of Jill for Jack. The lived experience for James opposes the metaphysical subject/object dichotomy of the modern period. This way of splitting up the world into the experiencing subject and the object experienced is, James believes, nothing more than a functional and theoretical description. In the following sections I relate James' process metaphysics and lived experience to the question of Mexican identity.

2 Octavio Paz's Criticism of Pachucos

Octavio Paz lived in Los Angeles, California from 1943 to 1945. He was there to study at the University of California, Berkeley on a Guggenheim scholarship. Paz dedicated the first chapter of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* to pachucos. Pachucos were Mexican-American young men and women who became known for their extravagant style of dress and speaking. Octavio Paz titled this chapter "The Pachuco and Other Extremes," but it was more precisely the experience of his Mexicanidad among pachucos that prompted him to write his book on what it means to be Mexican: "I should confess that many of the reflections in this essay occurred to me outside of Mexico, during a two-year stay in the United States" (Paz 1985: 12).⁷

Paz was very critical of pachucos for having lost their ability to speak Spanish. He did not care for, nor did he understand their defiant attitude:

[...] they feel ashamed of their origin [...] The pachuco does not want to become a Mexican again; at the same time he does not want to blend into the life of North America [...]. Whether we like it or not, these persons are Mexicans [...] the pachuco has lost his whole inheritance: language, religion, customs, beliefs [...] the pachuco is an impassive and sinister clown [...] his desire for self-abasement [...] constitutes the very foundation of his character [...]. He denies both the society from which he originated and that of North America. When he thrusts himself outward, it is not to unite with what surrounds him but rather to defy it (Paz 1985: 12).

I claim that Paz was unable to understand the lived experience of what it is to be a Mexican-American. Being the observer, and not the experiencer in the Jamesian distinction we made in the previous section, Paz did not understand the experience of being an immigrant, or the child of immigrant parents who are neither educated nor well-to-do, who are in fact punished and persecuted for speaking Spanish in school and in public. Paz seems to have been unaware of the history of violence towards Mexican-Americans in the southwest from

1848 to 1928, with 547 recorded lynchings of Mexicans,⁸ and the violence perpetrated by Whites towards Mexicans during the zoot-suit riots⁹ during the summer of 1943 in Los Angeles, which Paz must have known about given that he was in L.A. that same year. To be clear, Paz was a Mexican, writing about pachucos who were Mexican-American. Culturally and economically, Paz completely misunderstood pachucos, as Paz's own lived experience was very different from theirs. Paz came from an affluent family with the financial wherewithal to afford him trips to Europe and the U.S. as a young man. The pachucos he criticized so harshly had none of these economic opportunities. Pachucos were not in L.A. on scholarships.

The lived experience of pachucos was such that racist individuals in the U.S. were violent towards them because of their Mexican ethnic identity, while at the same time, pachucos were also rejected by Mexicans for not being *real* Mexicans. Paz was put off by the pachucos' extravagance and defiant attitude but did not understand *why* the pachucos took pride in their appearance. Octavio Paz speaks for many Mexicans from Mexico who believe that losing one's ability to speak Spanish "correctly," or losing Mexican customs and beliefs, and adopting the English language and American customs and beliefs, is a type of "bastardization" to be looked down upon. I argue, however, that after being deprived of their culture, language and values, the pachucos' way of dressing¹⁰ became a choice of resistance, a way maintaining a sense of pride in their Mexican identity.

Besides having a very different lived experience, one can see from Paz's demeaning description of pachucos in "The Pachuco and Other Extremes" that Paz must have subscribed to a substance metaphysics. A substance metaphysics entails a Mexicanidad with a set of immutable properties such as speaking Spanish, holding Mexican customs and beliefs, and dressing a certain way—like a *real* Mexican—and not speaking, behaving, or dressing like a pachuco, which according to Paz, is a type of bastardization of the true Mexican.



Image of Cesar Chavez wearing a zoot suit¹¹

3 Anzaldúa: the Spanglish Speaking Chicana

Paz only accepted pachucos as some form of defective Mexicans. Here I address the lived experience of a Mexican-American and our relationship with our Mexicanidad and Spanglish. Gloria Anzaldúa had the lived experience of *being* a Mexican-American whereas Paz did not share in that experience. Paz only observed the Mexican-Americans' lived experience in order to write about it and criticize it second-handedly.

Gloria Anzaldúa was a child of Mexicans who became part of the state of Texas and consequently the U.S. after the Republic of Texas seized the territory from Mexico in 1836:

The border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It left 100,000 Mexican citizens on this side, annexed by conquest along with the land. The land established by the treaty as belonging to Mexicans was soon swindled away from its owners. The treaty was never honored and restitution, to this day, has never been made (Anzaldúa 2007: 29).¹²

Anzaldúa relates how, when her father died, the Texas lawyers moved in and took her family's land away from her mother, who didn't speak English.

The history of the southwest region in the U.S. is a complex one, given that part of the history of this region includes people who saw themselves as American Indians (pre-Spanish conquest), then as Spanish (1492-1821), then as Mexican (1821-1848), and now as U.S.-American (1848 to the present). There have also been changes in the languages that the people from the U.S.-Mexico border speak. One such change has been the suppression of one's native language in favor of Spanish, and later in favor of English. Assimilation into the U.S.-American culture and language has been forcibly implemented throughout the U.S. school systems. Consequently, generations of Mexican people who found themselves in the U.S. have lost their ability to speak Spanish. Anzaldúa writes:

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for “talking back” to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. “If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong (Anzaldúa 2007: 75).

Anzaldúa's mother:

I want you to speak English. Pa'hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el ingles bien. Que vale toda tu educacion si todavia hablas ingles con un “accent” (Anzaldúa 2007: 75).

Anzaldúa termed this phenomenon “linguistic terrorism,” namely, having to change one's accent or dialect so as to not be persecuted. This linguistic terrorism has been only part of a larger cultural genocide to which Mexicans have been subject. Many of us, like Anzaldúa's mother above, have come to believe it is best for us to assimilate into U.S. American culture

and forget Spanish. Richard Rodriguez, the author of *Hunger for Memory* (1983: 14), for instance, believes it is best for children to learn to speak English as soon as possible, and to learn that they can have a public and a private identity.¹³ The public identity is to be expressed in English while the private identity (home/family) is to be expressed in Spanish. Rodriguez advocates the bifurcation of a person's identity because he believes this is the best way for us to achieve upward mobility or admission into the mainstream American culture (Rodriguez 1983: 39).

Given that Mexicans in the U.S. have been persecuted for speaking Spanish, many of us have lost our ability to communicate in Spanish, consequently when we speak, we often mix English and Spanish words.

Presently this infant language, this bastard language, Chicano Spanish, is not approved by any society [...]. Even our own people, other Spanish speakers nos quieren poner candados en la boca. They would hold us back with their bag of reglas de academia [...]. Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other [...]. Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas afraid of their censure. Their language was not outlawed in their countries. They had a whole lifetime of being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was a first language, taught in school, heard on radio and TV, and read in the newspaper (Anzaldúa 2007: 80).

Just as Octavio Paz wrote derisively about pachucos for their inability to express themselves in Spanish, likewise, many fluent Spanish speakers who have practiced Spanish all of their lives without persecution, also look upon Spanglish speakers with contempt. Thus our inability to relate to each other's lived experience, as well as our lack of historical and social perspective, divides us as Mexicans and Chicanxs, and Spanish and Spanglish speakers.

Returning to my thesis that Chicanxs are neither a bastardization of Anglo nor Mexican people and culture, nor is Spanglish a bastardization of English or español, Anzaldúa writes "Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally [...]; [it] is not incorrect, it is a living language" (Anzaldúa 2007: 77). I add that substance metaphysics does not allow us to adequately understand the Spanglish phenomenon. This is because from the perspective of substance metaphysics there is a language we call Spanish, which must then have a set of properties without which this language would then cease to be Spanish.

A process metaphysics, on the other hand, ascribes equal ontological value to the process of becoming and perishing as to that of being. Under this view of reality, the mixture of Indo-European languages gave way to Latin, which then gave way to a number of dialects and languages such as Portuguese, French, Italian, and Spanish. Spanish incorporated many Arabic words over the 700 years of Muslim presence in Spain, and in Mexico, Spanish incorporated Nahuatl words such as "chocolate," and "guajolote." Also, Spanish has developed differently throughout Latin America.

Just as Spanglish is spoken on the U.S. Mexico border, Portuñol is spoken on Brazil's border with Spanish-speaking countries. For centuries, the Caribbean islands were the borderlands between Europe, Africa, and the American continent. The Jamaican Patois, for instance, is a mix of Indigenous languages, Spanish, Portuguese, English, African

languages, French, Arabic, Hindu, and Dutch. Ultimately, if Spanglish is a bastardization of Spanish and English, then in order for us to be consistent, we must also say that Spanish is a debasement of proper Latin, and English the bastardization of the high Germanic language. That, or perhaps James and Anzaldúa are on to something, and Spanglish is simply the natural development of a living language.

4 The Chicanxs Lived Experience of Mexicanidad

Because of the political persecution that Chicanxs have experienced, Chicanxs who are conscious of being Mexican feel their Mexicanidad more palpably than Mexicans living in the interior of Mexico, where one's Mexicanidad is not the predominant identifier. When a Mexican is in Mexico, chatting with the person who sells newspapers, s/he probably won't ask her, "Are you, Mexican? I noticed you have an accent." If asked where she is from, she might answer, "I'm from Tamaulipas," but she is unlikely to answer, "I'm Mexican," because it is taken for granted that one is Mexican. While in Mexico, our Mexican identity is not the primary identifier.

The pachucos are only one instance of Mexican-Americans defiantly braving their Mexicanidad even while suffering violence perpetrated against them *for being Mexican*. In the U.S., our Mexicanidad is the first thing others notice about us before they even meet us. Our last names—Garcia, Lopez, Díaz—are clear indications to others who haven't met us, the color of our skin is an undeniable identifier, our accent gives us away. Our Mexicanidad is the first thing that others notice about us, so when we see ourselves through their eyes, we see ourselves as Mexican. It is in this sense that Chicanxs feel and live their Mexicanidad in a stronger way than Mexicans in Mexico who know they are Mexican but whose lived experience is such that they don't feel their Mexican identity day in and day out, first and foremost. The lived experience of Mexicans in Mexico is very different from that of Chicanxs in the U.S. Mexicans in Mexico have not been lynched for being Mexican the way Chicanxs have been lynched for being Mexican in the U.S.

5 Conclusion

In his book *Chicano Manifesto*, Armando Rendon points out how Anglos have pitted Blacks against Browns, thus keeping wages down and minorities in their places.¹⁴ The growers often broke the United Farm workers' strikes by hiring Mexican nationals, and this pitted Chicanxs and Mexicans against each other (Rendon 1971: 138). The land was stolen from Mexican families, who were subject to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; Mexicans have been lynched and our culture and language stripped away from us, and this pattern continues to this day with state-sanctioned laws such as Arizona's House Bill 2281, which precludes Mexican-American children from learning about our history and culture.¹⁵ It is not in the interest of Mexicans and Chicanxs to relate to each other as antagonists, for us to emphasize our differences instead of embracing our similarities.

Anzaldúa writes:

[...] Nosotros los Chicanos straddle the borderlands. We say nosotros los mexicanos

(by mexicanos we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one) [...] Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul—not one of mind, not one of citizenship (Anzaldúa 2007: 84).

By considering the perspective of a process metaphysics and the significance of a person's lived experience, in this article I have suggested that rather than seeing the Chicane culture as a debasement of Mexican culture, we could instead consider the possibility that Chicane culture and Spanglish are simply genuine expressions of Mexican culture and the Spanish language. From the beginning of her writings until her last and posthumously published book, Anzaldúa continued to explore new and different possible identities for Chicanes. Being from the U.S.-Mexico border, Anzaldúa's lived experience allowed her to intimately know that "the border is the locus of resistance, of rupture, of implosion and explosion, and of putting together the fragments and creating a new assemblage" (Anzaldúa 2015: 49).¹⁶ Ultimately, instead of accepting the dominant ideology that separates us due to the way we pronounce words, or how long we have lived in one country or the other and thus deriving a feeling of false superiority to one another, it is in our best interest to work together and possibly create long lasting changes in the way Mexicans fare on this and that side of the border.

On that day I gather the splintered and disowned
parts of la gente mexicana and hold them in my arms.
Todas las partes de nosotros valen (Anzaldúa 2015: 110).

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¹ William James, "A World of Pure Experience," in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1967 [1904]), 212.

² Richard Delgado, "Precious Knowledge: State Bans On Ethnic Studies, Book Traffickers (Librotraficantes), and A New Type Of Race Trial," *North Carolina Law Review* 91, (2013): 1513-54.

³ Chivís Martínez, "Young Thai Men Emulate Mexican Cholos," *Borderland Beat: Reporting on the Mexican Cartel Drug War*, 20 March 2014. <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2014/03/young-thai-men-emulate-mexican-cholos.html> (last accessed on April 7, 2018).

⁴ Please see: James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2014).

⁵ Kim Díaz, "Process Philosophy," in *American Philosophy: An Encyclopedia*, ed. John Lachs and Robert Talisse (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

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- ⁶ Kim Díaz, “Lived Experience,” in *American Philosophy: An Encyclopedia*, ed. John Lachs and Robert Talisse (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).
- ⁷ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York, NY: Grove Press, Inc. 1985).
- ⁸ William D. Carrigan, and Clive Webb, Op-ed. “Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence Against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928,” *The New York Times*, 20 Feb. 2015 (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/opinion/when-americans-lynched-mexicans.html?_r=0; last accessed on April 7, 2018).
- ⁹ The zoot suit riots took place during the summer of 1943 in Los Angeles, California. U.S. soldiers targeted and attacked pachucos for being “unpatriotic.”
- ¹⁰ Pachucos wore zoot suits (oversized suits) often with a fedora hat, and a long watch chain.
- ¹¹ Sonia Blade, “A young Cesar Chavez who would later become a civil rights activist and the voice of many Mexican American labor workers,” *Twitter, Inc.*, 31 March 2017 (<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/C8QjpUKVoAABfbi.jpg>; last accessed on April 7, 2018).
- ¹² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2007).
- ¹³ Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (New York, NY: Bantam, 1983).
- ¹⁴ Armando Rendon, *Chicano Manifesto* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1971).
- ¹⁵ Gowan Montenegro, Seel, Stevens, Antenori, Goodale, Weiers. 2010. State of Arizona. House of Representatives. Forty-ninth Legislature. H.B. 2281: Schools; prohibited courses; discipline. [introduced State of Arizona House of Representatives; 2010] <https://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/hb2281p.pdf> (7 April 2018).
- ¹⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light In The Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2015).