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Code-Switching in Gloria Anzaldúa’s 
*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and 
Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo*

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**ABSTRACT:** This research explores the practice of code-switching by bilingual Latinx writers by looking at the works *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa and *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros. In addition to discussing these two primary sources, the paper draws upon scholarly analyses of these works and the practice of code switching at large. This review discusses the growing prevalence of code-switching in Latinx literature, the subversive nature of the practice of code-switching, and the different approaches towards and functions of code-switching in literature. Ultimately, this research demonstrates the ways in which Anzaldúa and Cisneros use code-switching to explore Latinx and Chicana identity while also furthering an artistic vision.

**KEYWORDS:** Sandra Cisneros; Gloria Anzaldúa; code switching; Latino literature
Over the past few decades, bilingual Latinx writers have challenged monolingual conventions of literature by engaging in the practice of code-switching, using Spanish in works primarily written in English. By doing so, they more closely reflect the bilingual experience and often subvert the idea that the only legitimate form of writing is in a single language. Both Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo* are works of Chicana literature that focus heavily on borders, both literal and figurative, and the language used in these works reflects the physical and cultural borders around which they center. Ultimately, the use of code-switching in these two works mirror the authors’ explorations of Chicana identity and reject clear-cut dualisms imposed on people with bicultural identities, while also furthering an aesthetic and artistic vision.

Much has been written about the practice of code-switching. Lourdes Torres describes code-switching as, “the alteration of two languages in a verbal or written text” (76). Cecilia Montes-Alcalá says “code-switching may communicate biculturalism, humor, criticism, or ethnicity and may serve other stylistic purposes” (126). According to Montes-Alcalá, the practice of code-switching in literature is not a recent development. Instead, it dates back as far as the sixteenth century, when Mexican poets used both Spanish and Nahuatl in their writings. The alteration of Spanish and English became prominent around the time of the Mexican-American War in the mid-nineteenth century (125). The practice has become increasingly common in mainstream literature published by Latinx writers in recent decades.

Evidently, code-switching is by no means a new phenomenon and has been common amongst Latinx communities in both speech and writing for centuries. However, the practice has attracted a growing amount of scholarly interest over the last few years. Holly Cashman discusses how:

... it is not the practice of code-switching, but rather its study, which has flourished over the past quarter of a century. Previously considered a kind of deviant linguistic behavior which indicated a speaker’s inability to separate two languages at her or his disposal, linguists now recognize code-switching as a functional linguistic behavior which demonstrates the speaker’s ability to manipulate the grammar and lexicon of two languages at the same time (132).

The practice in literature can be subversive by establishing code-switching as a legitimate literary convention. Over recent years, as code switching has become more acceptable in the realms of linguistics and literature, publishers have given authors more freedom to engage in code-switching. As Lourdes Torres points out, the openness of publishers to code-switching is important because “questions of italicizing Spanish, providing translations, and adding glossaries must be negotiated between authors, editors, and publishers. Those writers who have achieved a degree [ . . . ] of marketability have more say as to the frequency and appearance of Spanish in the text” (77). Moreover, code-switching is becoming more accepted across the literary world. Cecilia Montes-Alcalá asserts that “the increasing growth of bilingual literature in the United States in the last few decades appears to indicate that code-switching in writing has finally acquired legitimacy” (125). This observation suggests that recently, code-switching has begun to become accepted as “literary.”

For many Latinx authors, code-switching in their writing is both an artistic and political statement. According to Torres’ essay “In the Contact Zone: Code-switching Strategies by Latino/a Writers”:

Using Spanish in an English text serves to legitimize the much-maligned practice of mixing codes in vernacular speech. In the United States, the presence of large and small Latino/a communities across the county, increasing number of Latino/a immigrants, and the US/Mexican border means that code-switching in literature is not only metaphorical, but represents a reality where segments of the population are living between cultures and language; literary language actualizes the discourse of the border and bilingual/bicultural communities (76).

In this quote, Torres summarizes the multiple levels on which code-switching functions in many Latinx texts. The use of both Spanish and English in a text has clear political implications because it centers the realities of language and life for bilingual Latinx living in the United States, who have previously been pushed to the margins. This fact is especially true because the conversation around language in the United States is often heavily politicized, and anti-immigration and racist sentiments are often tied up with the idea that only English should be spoken in the United States. Thus, by weaving together both Spanish and English in their works, Latinx writers are directly rejecting this idea and asserting the legitimacy of code-switching, a practice in
which many bilingual individuals engage in within their day-to-day lives.

Written in 1987, when code-switching was only just beginning to be accepted in American literature, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is a seminal work that, through both prose and poetry, uses the physical US-Mexico border and the areas surrounding it to explore the invisible borders that exist between cultures and identities. The work draws heavily from Anzaldúa’s own experiences as a Chicana lesbian. In the essay “Storytelling As Oppositional Culture: Race, Class, and Gender in the Borderlands,” Thesera Martinez describes *Borderlands* as “an articulate form of resistance and social critique, empowerment and strength, in the face of internal colonialism, institutional discrimination, and racial formation” (34). Anzaldúa’s use of language is in itself one of the ways that the text achieves the resistance Martinez describes. Anzaldúa’s code-switching has clear political implications and ties directly into social critiques found elsewhere in the book, not only because it resists monolingual hegemony, but also because Anzaldúa uses the fusion of English and Spanish as a rejection of dualities. The ways in which Anzaldúa figuratively crosses and blurs the border between the two languages reflects the work’s broader themes of both crossing borders and existing on the cusps of them.

In the essay “Metaphors of a Mestizaje Consciousness: Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*,” Eriksa Aigner-Varoz asserts that Anzaldúa “constructs a mestizaje consciousness as a dynamic new mythos capable of breaking down dualistic hegemonic paradigms” (47). This consciousness has been built upon by later Chicana writers and offers a valuable analysis from which these other works can be approached. Sandra Cisneros’s novel *Caramelo*, a coming-of-age story about a Mexican-American girl named Lala, explores many of the same themes as Borderlands. Nassim Balestrini argues in the essay “Transnational and Transethnric Textures, or ‘Intricate Interdependencies’ in Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo*” that “Cisneros follows Anzaldúa’s trajectory of striving to overcome dualisms” (82). In their respective works, both Cisneros and Anzaldúa reject dualisms by shaping identities that move beyond the divides between the many borders they contain. The same holds true for their use of language. Both writers weave English and Spanish together various ways, resulting in works that revolves around the experiences of bilingual Chicanas. *Borderlands* and *Caramelo* both explore Chicana identity as both are written by and from the perspective of Chicana women. Anzaldúa writes in Borderlands on Chicano/a identity, “We don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Anglolessness” (40). As Ana Sánchez-Muñoz explains in her essay “Who Soy Yó?: The Creative Use of ‘Spanglish’ to Express a Hybrid Identity in Chicana/o Heritage Language Learners of Spanish”:

The term Chicana/o was originally a derogatory term applied to the descendants of Mexican people in the United States. The term was later adopted as a term of ethnic pride and political consciousness during the civil rights movements of the 1960’s. To identify oneself as Chicana/o as opposed to Mexican-American or Latino or Hispanic means reasserting a unique ethnic and sociopolitical bond. It means claiming a unique culture not just a mixture of two colonial pasts . . . . (440).

Both Cisneros and Anzaldúa assert this Chicana claim to a unique culture in their works by rejecting the idea that Chicana identity is merely the duality of Mexican and American. Both writers use code-switching in a way that reflects this distinct culture and identity. Neither writer merely alternates between Spanish and English, or shoe-horns Spanish words into an otherwise English text, but instead mix the two languages in a way that results in a work that expresses the experiences of these bilingual writers and characters.

*Borderlands/La Frontera* draws importance to code-switching and language with regards to Chicana identity in the chapter titled “How to Tame a Wild Tongue.” Anzaldúa speaks extensively about Chicano Spanish, which she identifies as “un nuevo lenguaje”—a new language. She describes Chicano Spanish as a “border tongue which developed naturally” and defends this use of language against both Spanish and English speakers who would accuse it of being lesser because it is neither proper English nor proper Spanish (35). She muses:

For a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but the create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither español ni inglés, but both (36).

Anzaldúa attempts to use code-switching in her writing
as rejection of dualisms. The language she uses is not either English or Spanish, just as her identity is not only either American or Mexican. Instead, the merging of the two languages forms a unique product, just as the merging of cultures results in a Chicana identity that Anzaldúa asserts as distinct.

As made obvious by its title, the central theme in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* is borders. The ultimate result of the work is an assertion of identity for those who live in between these borders, shaped by Anzaldúa’s own experiences as a Chicana lesbian. For instance, Anzaldúa explores how her queerness does not merely place her between male and female, but results in a new identity. She writes, “Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are only able to be one thing or the other” (1504). Here, Anzaldúa clearly rejects dualities relating to sex and gender. This move illustrates the way in which Anzaldúa uses code-switching to reinforce and reflect the overarching theme of the text. Anzaldúa uses code-switching in *Borderlands/La Frontera* to further reject dualities in that she refuses to use either English or Spanish but rather weaves the two languages together. Thus, the language used in the work serves to further its central assertion.

Anzaldúa uses different methods for incorporating bilingualism and code-switching into *Borderlands*. The bilingual nature of the work is established immediately within the title, *Borderlands/La Frontera* stated in both Spanish and English. In *Borderlands*, the Spanish is italicized. However, it is not used in a way where the primary concern is ease of reading for a monolingual English reader. Anzaldúa does not merely use an easy to recognize Spanish word here or there and does not follow her Spanish with a translation in the text. She includes within the text quotes from others, entirely in Spanish with no translation, such as the quote from the band Los Tigres del Norte included at the beginning of “The Homeland, Aztlan: *El otro México*” (1491). Although she does occasionally offer footnotes that translate parts of the Spanish text, Anzaldúa does not translate all of the Spanish. Instead of cushioning Spanish words with English, Anzaldúa writes entire phrases, sentences, and stanzas in Spanish. She will often switch between English and Spanish mid-sentence. Take, for instance, this stanza from the poetry at the beginning of the work:

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Mira el mar atacar
la cerca en Border Field Park
con sus buchones de agua,
an Easter Sunday resurrection
of the brown blood in my veins.
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In these five short lines, Anzaldúa switches back and forth between Spanish and English. She also uses such a significant amount of Spanish that a monolingual English reader would not be able to easily comprehend without looking up the translations of at least some of the Spanish words. Clearly, then, she is not writing to cater to a monolingual audience, but rather writing to and for the bilingual experience.

Torres says that one analysis of code-switching in much Latinx literature and the way it is padded to accommodate the monolingual reader suggests that these texts “reinforce a mono-lingual complacency” because “cushioning Spanish…may allow the reader the sense s/he is entering the linguistic world of bilingual Latino/as without having to make any effort” (81). In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa does not cushion her Spanish and does not prioritize the monolingual English reader, leaving no room for “monolingual complacency.” In this way, she is subverting many of the expectations and truly centering bilingualism. The Spanish used is not incidental and does not merely, as Torres says, “serve to Latinize the text” (78). Instead, it is an essential part of the text and the language and poetics of it are just as important as those of the English. As Cashman says, “Anzaldúa offers a challenge to her reader: if you want to read her book, you have to learn her language” (138). This assertion of the legitimacy of code-switching and refusal to bend to monolingual tastes shows the radical way in which Anzaldúa centers her own bilingual and bicultural experiences. Furthermore, it reflects a usage of the Chicano Spanish that Anzaldúa views as a new and legitimate language.

Just as in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, borders are centered in *Caramelo*. Lala’s family crosses back and forth over the Mexican–American border, and other borders exist as well, such as those between generations. Heather Alumbaugh writes, “Because Lala’s Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicano/a family members cross many geographical . . . boundaries, their stories of migration demand are narrative voice that likewise has the ability to transgress boundaries” (54). Cisneros achieves this narrative voice through the structure of the story, but also largely by crossing linguistic boundaries through the use
of code-switching. Just as in *Borderlands*, Cisneros uses code-switching in *Caramelo* functions to further the theme of border crossings and reject dualities of identity. For instance, Celaya, the narrator, remembers the roar “in Spanish from the kitchen radio, in English from TV cartoons, and in a mix of the two from [Aunty Licha’s] two boys begging for *un níkle* for Italian lemonade” (192). This establishes that Celaya and her Mexican-American family’s experiences usually happen in two languages simultaneously, and that in day-to-day life, they speak both English and Spanish. This reflects a blending of the two languages and the two cultural identities to create something new, an experience unique to bilingual Mexican-American families, such as Lala’s.

Lala’s experiences of being a bilingual Chicana separate her not only from monolingual English-speaking Americans, but also from her own family still in Mexico. Language is a critical reflection of this division. After moving to Chicago, for instance, Lala’s Mexican grandmother is bothered as her Mexican-American grandchildren mumble “in their atrocious pocho Spanish with English words minced in,” *pocho* being a word often used pejoratively to describe Mexican-Americans who are perceived as speaking Spanish poorly (Cisneros 4904). This highlights how the language spoken by bilingual Chicano/as in the United States, including the code-switching used within this language, is something different entirely from either Spanish or English—the “new language” described by Anzaldúa.

As Torres points out, for much of Latino/a literature published by the mainstream press in the United States, “the reader is largely imagined as a monolingual English speaker” (77). Because of this, authors and publishers employ different strategies for including Spanish in a largely English text. Often, Spanish words are italicized and used only when their meaning can be clearly derived from context or are immediately followed by a translation. Cisneros, for instance, uses many of these methods. Spanish words in *Caramelo* are italicized and used sparingly in a way where their meaning can be derived by context or followed or preceded by a translation.

However, Cisneros also uses another method for working Spanish into her text by transliterating Spanish into English. As Torres says:

There are also instances of “calques,” which are creative English renditions of Spanish words and phrases translated literally or figuratively. In this case, Spanish is indirectly or covertly present in the English text. For example, some of the characters in *Caramelo* have odd sounding names that are translations of common Spanish names . . . Aunty White-Skin is recognizable to the bilingual as Titi Blanca (78).

Another instance of this method occurs towards the beginning of the novel, when Celaya describes herself making “sand houses” instead of the common English term “sand castles.” While this does have the effect of working Spanish into the book while still allowing it to be accessible to monolingual English readers, that is not all this strategy accomplishes. Through transliterating and using calques, Cisneros is not only subtly working more Spanish into the novel, but is also breaking down the borders between the languages of Spanish and English, applying the syntax of one to the words of another. In this way, Cisneros’ use of language is rejecting dualism by using Spanish and English not separately or interchangeably, but by working together seamlessly together to create a distinctive work reliant on both languages.

Both Cisneros and Anzaldúa use Spanish not simply to make a political statement, but also clearly as an important artistic element in each of their works. In Spanish, they are able to communicate ideas or emotions that may not communicate as clearly in English, and at times, the Spanish acts to add an additional sense of poetry to the language. This artistry is especially prominent in *Borderlands*, which contains poetry, often with entire stanzas written in Spanish. In these places, Anzaldúa is able to capture a sentiment artistically in Spanish where English might have failed, while in other places she might use English because it better fits with what she is trying to say. For instance, she writes one stanza in Spanish ending with the line “Ay ay ay, soy mexicana de este lado” meaning “I am Mexican on this side” (1493). This is a clear instance where using Spanish fits because the stanza is addressing the part of the speaker’s identity that is tied to her Mexican heritage.

In *Caramelo*, Cisneros often uses Spanish in similar ways, adding it to the text when it captures something that would be impossible in English. When Lala is describing how her grandmother fell in love with her grandfather Narciso, she describes “a beautiful boy blessed with a Milky Way of lunares floating across his creamy skin,” explaining “Here I must insist on using the word lunares, literally ‘moons’, but I mean moles, or freckles, or beauty spots, though none of these words comes close to
capturing the Spanish equivalent with its sensibility of charm and poetry” (1755). This quote demonstrates how code-switching can be employed artistically to enhance the text by creating poetics through the choice of a word in a different language. Simultaneously, it serves as a reflection of the bilingual experience of searching for a word that can be found in one language, but not perfectly in the other.

Cisneros again directly draws attention to the different ways in which English and Spanish function when the narrator describes how once her Aunty threatened to kill herself during an argument with Uncle Fat-Face. She threatens that she will “Kill myself! Kill myself!!!” which to Lala “sounds much more dramatic in Spanish—¡Me mato! ¡¡¡Me maaaaaaaatoooooo!!!” (271). This example illustrates ways in which bilingual writers can switch between English and Spanish to serve different functions and create different effects in a text. In some instances, like this one, the Spanish might convey an increased sense of drama or poetry. Thus, the use of Spanish is often a conscious artistic and literary choice, showing that two languages might at times more effectively communicate a particular literary idea or emotion than a single language and exemplifying how sometimes the use of Spanish in works by bilingual authors is an artistic, or even aesthetic, decision. These artistic choices are also, in themselves, political, as they further the centering of bilingual Chicana experiences.

While it is undeniable that some writers use code-switching to an artistic or aesthetic end, arguments remain over whether aesthetic considerations should take precedence over authentically mirroring the way bilingual individuals speak. Domnita Dumitrescu writes about the question over whether code-switching in Latinx literature authentically reflects the Spanglish spoken by many Latinx. She brings up how many have questioned “whether or not, or at least to what extent, literary code-switching is ‘authentic’, that is, reflective or mimetic, of what is taking place in the real world bilingual Hispanic communities in the United States” (357). Obviously, works that are being published with a monolingual audience in mind are less mimetic of real life bilingual communities. Caramelo might fall under this category because Cisneros uses Spanish in a way that can be fairly easily understood by monolingual readers. While Cisneros might authentically mirror the way bilingual Latinx communities in the United States speak, linguistic authenticity is not the primary function of code-switching in the text. Instead, it is used to create a particular artistic and literary affect. Thus, the code-switching in the text cannot be evaluated solely by how authentically it captures the way in which Mexican-American communities speak, since it instead is deployed to achieve a particular political and artistic effect.

Cisneros and Anzaldúa clearly use different methods of incorporating Spanish into their respective works, Caramelo and Borderlands/La Frontera. Anzaldúa’s strategies of code-switching are more challenging to a monolingual reader than most Latinx works published for a mainstream audience, suggesting that she is not writing primarily for monolingual English-speaking Americans, while Cisneros incorporates Spanish in a way that is more accessible to monolingual readers by using it only in places where the meaning can be easily derived by non-Spanish speakers or including a translation within the text.

Both Cisneros and Anzaldúa both employ code-switching as an artistic choice; however, both writers also use code-switching to explore bicultural identities while ultimately rejecting dualisms and forming new approaches of Chicana identity. While Borderlands and Caramelo exhibit different methods by which Latinx authors can employ code-switching, both similarly demonstrate the many functions that code-switching can have within a single text. Within each of these respective works, the act of code-switching is simultaneously fulfilling aesthetic, artistic, literary, and political purposes and, overall, adding an additional dimension to the text that reinforces and deepens its meaning.
## References


