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Soy un amasamiento. Political Collectivity and the Problem of Identity

Marina Martinez Mateo, Akademie der Bildenden Künste München, DE, martinezmateo@adbk.mhn.de

"Identity" is an important political category to highlight and confront experiences of discrimination, exclusion, or oppression that remain invisible within an abstract reference to equality. However, as a point of reference, "identity" produces ambiguities and exclusions that seem to challenge the possibility of building political collectivities and establishing practices of speaking for each other. In the first two parts of this article, I will develop the problem of identity for the formation of collectives. On this ground, I will argue that instead of leading to further fragmentation and individualization, this insight could be a starting point to think about the relationship between identity and political subjectivity in different ways. This will be discussed in the third step, drawing primarily on Chicana Feminism (especially Gloria Anzaldúa and Chela Sandoval) where the aim of building political collectivities that surpass the notion of identity assumptions is derived from an ethical-aesthetic idea of transformation and alienation that I will suggest to understand with Anzaldúa's term "amasamiento."



1. Introduction

What can "identity politics" do and in which sense can "identity" be an emancipatory category to confront discrimination, subordination, or oppression? This question relies on the observation that, today, we are witnessing a widespread reproach against identity politics—not only from conservatives but also from the left. Among other points, one common accusation is that categories such as race and gender are used deterministically: individuals are fixed to pre-given identities and thus individual agency becomes secondary to these structural categories. Thereby, societies are fragmented along with these categories and, in the end, there remains no room for solidarity, collectivity, or any common political vision at all. Such accusations mostly express a very reduced understanding of identity politics which has little to do with the actual broader theoretical and political context and history of identity politics itself. Nevertheless, I suggest taking this critique as a starting point to further reflect on the paradoxes of identity politics and on how to solve them in a way that could take us forward in a common politics of emancipation.

On the one hand, it seems plausible and necessary to highlight that discrimination, exploitation, and oppression function along identity ascriptions—by marking people as, say, "women" and/or "of color"—and that discrimination, exploitation, and oppression will therefore manifest according to these identity categories. Based on this, advocacy against structural inequalities must fundamentally begin with naming and taking into account these identity-related differences in opportunities of life, exposure to violence, or everyday experiences of devaluation. However, this claim is not as easy as it might seem. For what does "identity" even mean, and who is included when a reference is made to a specific category of identity? Who exactly is spoken of when a *collective* experience is evoked? Thus, on the other hand, it seems also necessary to assure that these groups and identity-related differences are not treated as fixed entities and stay questionable. This is the challenge of identity politics: how can we think of group-based structural inequality without being too sure about who is privileged and who is not? How may the collectivities of an assumed common identity be linked to the collectivities of common political action and how can we keep alive the difference between the two forms of collectivity: experience and politics?

Based on these questions, I aim to make a case for an understanding of political collectivity that would include an affirmation of "identity" as an undetermined category of experience and simultaneously a critique of "identity" as a foundation for politics. As I will show, this claim is not external but can be derived from the theoretical work on and in identity politics itself. Especially on this point, there is much to learn from Chicana Feminism. Here, we find an ambivalent and doubtful reference to identity that aims

to surpass identity in search of new political subjectivities. Crucially, the question of representation and the alienation of speaking as and for someone (else) changes from being a problem to being a possibility. This will be developed in three steps. Firstly, I show why the intervention of identity politics—which highlights differences against the mere reference to a neutral generality and raises a serious critique of representation as speakership—is necessary. Secondly, I discuss how this insistence on difference leads to a paradox or even a dead-end that is expressed in the attempt to a politics without representation. Finally, and based on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Chela Sandoval, I will try to develop an alternative that, by linking the ethical, the aesthetic, and the political, seeks new forms of collectivity and critical practices of representation that challenge the notion of identity in a fundamental way.

2. On the Necessity of Identity Politics: The Problem of Generality without Difference

What is the problem with referring to a general social whole without highlighting internal differences? Indeed, at first view, we might tend to think that discrimination and subordination are based on (stereotyped) assumptions about group-based differences (not equality): it is because women are thought to be more suitable as mothers and less as, say, philosophers, in the first place, that fewer women might get the chance to be a professor of philosophy. However, today, there are presumably few people who would hold to that assumption and there is no explicit law or norm that would exclude women from philosophy—and nevertheless, it can be observed that few women *do* have the chance to become professors of philosophy. Thus, an abstract reference to equal opportunities or equal suitability does not allow for addressing and explaining such inequalities that structure the social world.

Related to race, this is the important insight of the concept of "color-blindness,"¹ meaning that racism today masks under an assumption of equality. Two connected elements within this concept can be highlighted. The first assumption of "color-blindness" is that "whiteness" (or white masculinity) is not defined (anymore) in terms of superiority or supremacy (at least not in a wider public and not explicitly) but in terms of neutrality: "whiteness" means "not of color,"² it means to be "unmarked." Whiteness is the normcore around which everything else is organized (according to the

¹ For further discussions on color-blindness, see, among others: Patricia Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: Macmillan, 1997); Leslie G. Carr, *Color-Blind Racism* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

² Ashley Woody Doane, "Rethinking Whiteness Studies," in *White Out. The Continuing Significance of Race*, ed. Ashley "Woody" Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York, London: Routledge, 2003), 8.

measure of "difference"). Whiteness is the universal category that is always in place when no further specification is made.³ Thus, it invokes an exclusionary (and therefore false) universal that does not take into account the experiences of those who do not count as "norm" but as "different." Secondly, this exclusion also invisibilizes the privileges that come along with being white by presenting them as normality.⁴ Charles Mills and Woody Doane, here, refer specifically to the privilege of being treated as an individual and not as a representative of a racial or social group. It is based on this privilege that a white perspective might favor explanations for social phenomena that focus on individual achievement rather than on social structure. Color-blindness means to forget about the social/racial structure that blocks or enables individual opportunities:

Because whites tend not to see themselves in racial terms and not to recognize the existence of the advantages that whites enjoy in American society, this promotes a worldview that emphasizes individualistic explanations for social and economic achievement, as if the individualism of white privilege was a universal attribute.⁵

Within a view on society according to which everyone has the same rights and everyone (individually) has the possibility of taking responsibility for the organization of his or her own life, social inequalities are always only personal defeats of individuals—never structurally caused. However, conditions of success are in fact distributed differently, there is direct (though sometimes implicit or unconscious) discrimination by individuals, and there are institutions that are structured in a way that favors some and harms others. With an individualistic explanation that builds on equality and neutrality, however, these factors cannot be addressed.

Thus, if discrimination and marginalization function not through the explicit devaluation and exclusion of individuals and groups but through an abstract and thereby false generality, then insisting on difference becomes the only possible political response. Marginalized groups will claim that this generality *is* false: that the proclaimed universal is a *white* and therefore particularizing "universal." This critique of generality is also a critique of representation since, based on that, it is precisely not legitimate to assume that everyone can equally speak for everyone. The neutrality of "color-blindness" is this same neutrality that manifests itself in the assumption of a neutral speaker position. The claim to speak for everyone and the belief that the

³ Doane, "Whiteness," 12.

⁴ Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 28.

⁵ Doane "Whiteness," 14.

content of one's speech is independent of particular personal experiences presupposes that the position of speaking is seen as transparent or neutral. It presupposes that one's experience may count as generalizable: more than just as personal but rather as political, normative, philosophical... Those experiences that do not conform to an assumed "shared" normality, to the assumption of being or seeing "like everyone else," are structurally excluded from the collective which is spoken for. And subjects who are not seen as part of this color-blind "normality" will probably not be accepted at the neutral speaker position in the first place. This critique has been raised on an epistemological and on a political level.

First, it has been one of the important insights by feminist epistemology that the ideal of an epistemological subject detached from the social world not only expresses and reproduces power structures but also produces limited or simply false knowledge.

By following strict methodological rules, scientists aim to distance themselves from the values, vested interests, and emotions generated by their class, race, sex, or unique situation. By decontextualizing themselves, they allegedly become detached observers and manipulators of nature.⁶

With this "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere,"⁷ it is obscured that even the detached researcher won't speak from "nowhere" but from a specific position—a position that enjoys the privilege of being seen as unspecific and that, therefore, excludes all knowledge that is based on and derived from the lived experience of subordinated groups.⁸ Against this, what is needed is a culture of knowledge in which "[e]ach group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge."⁹

Second, in a very different context, feminist political theorists have made a similar claim about political representation, emphasizing that subordinated groups should have the opportunity of representing themselves, or otherwise their perspectives and interests would get lost systematically. In her famous essay "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women?", Jane Mansbridge coins the term "descriptive representation" for the claim that when it comes to marginalized groups "representatives are [meaning: should be] in their own persons and lives in some sense typical of the

⁶ Patricia Hill-Collins, "Black Feminist Epistemology," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, London: Routledge, 2000), 255.

⁷ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581.

⁸ Hill-Collins, "Black Feminist Epistemology," 257–260.

⁹ Hill-Collins, "Black Feminist Epistemology," 270.

larger class of persons whom they represent."¹⁰ This short description is very helpful for understanding what descriptive representation means and, also, which problems group-based self-representation may entail.¹¹ Most importantly, the statement makes clear that descriptive representation is based on characteristics that representatives have, as is said, "in their own persons and lives." That means that representatives and represented are not united through shared (acquired) political positions, but through features that they presumably simply *have* as persons. These common features, as Mansbridge goes on to point out, can be determined both in terms of (assumed) "visible characteristics" (gender or race) or in terms of shared *biographies* (if someone grew up in the country vs. the city or if someone went through an experience of migration, for instance). In both cases, however, Mansbridge refers to features that are part of a presumably given (and not freely chosen) identity—while, at the same time, it is necessarily presupposed that these features do not stand for themselves but express something deeper: they are associated with shared needs or perspectives that might be addressed through the self-representation of this group. Where Mansbridge openly states that representatives should be "in some sense typical" of the group they stand for, it is suggested that it is even possible to determine a group like "women" based on essential ("typical") characteristics. However, who may count as a "typical" woman—and why?

Here, the problem with group-based difference begins: Within this concept, there is no room for discussing the presuppositions about the shared characteristics of a group, and neither for discussing *which* groups require special descriptive representation. The foundation of descriptive representation lies in an assumption of identity that cannot be politicized itself but must be taken for granted if this model is to accomplish its political purpose. Only if "the" women exist (based on common visible "markers") and only if it may plausibly be assumed that they have—from birth or experience—certain common interests, only then the descriptive representation of women by women can contain a credible democratic promise. However, these assumptions are certainly not unproblematic. For what should these unique "markers" of womanhood even be? And which specific experiences within the diverse experiences that women make in different places of the world and different social positions may be thought of as "in some sense typical?" If it has been stated above that the naïve formation of generalities forms the basis for exclusion, then it must be noted now that holding onto identity-based difference can produce new exclusions—or the same again, since a reference to identity

¹⁰ Jane Mansbridge, "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent Yes," *The Journal of Politics* 61, no. 3 (1999): 629.

¹¹ See for the following points Marina Martínez Mateo, "Füreinander Sprechen: Zu einer feministischen Theorie der Repräsentation," *Leviathan* 47, no. 3 (2019).

also implies a form of generalization. After all, in case of doubt, it will be the experiences of *certain* women that are considered "typical"—women who are politically more privileged and therefore more visible, and who can thus become the defining norm of womanhood in the first place. This shows that we need to discuss the critique of generality and the question of speakership in a more complex way. It may not be enough to highlight the perspectives and interests of discriminated groups. Rather, the formation of these groups itself must be part of the discussion. It must be discussed how these groups which are set against false generality come into being—and what forms of internal hierarchies are (re)produced through the way they are constructed.

3. Intersectionality and the Paradox of Identity

This claim and this differentiation of the above critique of generality was raised by the intervention of Black feminism against white (and one may add: bourgeois) second-wave feminism in the 1980s. Referring to white feminism, Kimberlé Crenshaw writes in her groundbreaking article "Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex:"

Not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when white women *speak for and as women*. The authoritative universal voice—usually white male subjectivity masquerading as non-racial, non-gendered objectivity—is merely transferred to those who, but for gender, share many of the same cultural, economic and social characteristics.¹²

Just as the white male position structurally excludes women, by positing itself as universal (as gender-neutral, universally human), in white feminism (similarly) the collective subject "women" is formed in a general, abstract way that is blind to the fact that it can only be produced by the oppressive generalization of specific experiences and positions within this collectivity. Similarly, bell hooks argues:

The force that allows white feminist authors to make no reference to racial identity in their books about 'women' that are in actuality about white women is the same one that would compel any author writing exclusively on black women to refer explicitly to their racial identity. That force is racism.¹³

¹² Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, Art. 8 (1989): 154; italics mine.

¹³ bell hooks, "Racism and Sexism: The Issue of Accountability," in *Ain't I A Woman. Black Women and Feminism* (London, Winchester: Pluto Press, 1982), 138.

Racism allows white women to refer to themselves simply as "women" and to speak for women as if all women shared a common experience. Racism means here the white privilege to forget that race is effective. As she goes on to say, it is because these women belong to the "dominant race" that their experiences are assumed to be "representative." Out of this critique, the notion of "intersectionality," coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, became significant and is today, indeed, widely established in feminist theory and practice. The perspective of intersectionality provided a more general conceptual framing for the critical (political and theoretical) interventions of Black feminism. It means that we can only properly understand forms of oppression by moving away from an essentializing standardization of identity categories. If we start from fixed categories such as "race" or "gender" (which essentialize insofar as they presumably always already know who is part of them), we will structurally always start from the respective privileged positions *within* that group. All women who occupy "marginal" positions in the group of "women" are simply subsumed under the general norm that defines the category and thus made invisible: "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately."¹⁴ The decisive point about the intersection of racism and sexism is that it generates unique experiences that are not understandable through one *or* the other category but only through their simultaneous effectiveness. Thus, to analyze how discrimination or oppression works, an additive view cannot be sufficient. Rather, it is necessary to look at these forms of oppression (racism and sexism) starting from their dynamic interaction. Based on this insight, it seems inappropriate to think of oppression as a simple binary between oppressors and oppressed but rather as a complex system of relations in which the positions are never absolutely clear.¹⁵

The radicality of this claim—and the theoretical as well as practical problems that this radicality implies—may easily be overlooked: ultimately, it is a claim about the analytics of oppression in general; stating that there is no sexism *per se* and racism *per se* (and, of course, class oppression and other forms of oppression) *and* their intersection. Rather, oppression *in itself* and in *any* case can only be understood by analyzing the

¹⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 12045; see also Hill-Collins, "Black Feminist Epistemology," 269.

¹⁵ Anna Carastathis plausibly distinguishes between the *phenomenological* dimension of intersectionality (referring to the fact that, for those who are affected by multiple oppression, it is not possible to distinguish on which category of oppression a particular experience is based: subjectively they always manifest together) and the *ontological* dimension of intersectionality (referring to the fact that the systems of oppression and the categories of social inequality, in their very constitution, depend on each other); "The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory," *Philosophy Compass* 9, no. 5 (2014): 307.

relations, intersections, and contradictions that these categories entail. That means we may only understand what sexism even means if we analyze its functioning in relation to race—and again, in relation to class, and again in relation to age, and so on. These different "systems of oppression" do not exist without the others, even if they may not always appear together. The (seemingly) absent categories, too, shape, in their absence, the structure of the others: in a social context consisting of white women only, their understanding of what it means to be a woman will be shaped by race—even if they probably won't notice. No category may be reduced to another and none is more fundamental than the other.

This idea of a simultaneous co-constitution and irreducibility of categories of oppression is brought forward against the traditional orthodox Marxist prioritization of (universal) class struggle where it is assumed that all other political fights are nothing more than first steps to true liberation while this liberation itself can only be brought forward by the proletariat.¹⁶ This prioritizing structure was, in a way, still present in the Combahee River Collective which highlighted that class needs to be understood in its relation to race and gender—and located Black women at this most fundamental position of universal liberation: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."¹⁷ However, with the perspective of intersectionality, as it has been further elaborated by Black feminist thinkers, this idea of a universal revolutionary standpoint—that is: the idea of the "most oppressed of all groups," whose emancipation would lead to the true liberation of society as a whole—becomes problematic in itself. This also applies to the epistemological dimension of oppression: "Although it is tempting to claim that Black women are more oppressed than everyone else and therefore have the best standpoint from which to understand the mechanisms, processes, and effects of oppression, this is not the case."¹⁸ Instead, the claim is to acknowledge the respective partiality of each experience of oppression and to recognize that there are always other forms of oppression that are too far away from one's own experience to perceive them.

If the concept of intersectionality is understood in this ontological fundamentality and complexity, however, it implies massive requirements to think in terms of intersectionality and, even more so, to act accordingly: Since, how are we supposed to

¹⁶ Carastathis, "Concept of Intersectionality," 308. See, as an example, Jean-Paul Sartre's interpretation of the anti-colonial struggle: "Black Orpheus," in *What is Literature and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 294–298.

¹⁷ Combahee River Collective, "Combahee River Collective Statement" (1977): 3.

¹⁸ Hill-Collins, "Black Feminist Epistemology," 270.

deal with the fact that every identity category and every standpoint may be endlessly fragmented?¹⁹ How could we confront any system of oppression and discrimination based on this insight? How can collectivity come into being or into acting? If we (as the perspective of intersectionality rightly does) emphasize how fragmented and diverse oppression is it must be acknowledged that there can always be another possible dimension of oppression that would have to be considered to even understand any system of oppression whatsoever. If we think of any system of oppression as determined and built through other systems of oppression, how can we then even start speaking of one form of oppression without also speaking about potentially endless further systems and forms of oppression that might be effective in the very same situation or phenomenon without being noticed? In terms of representation, this means that whenever someone claims to speak for someone, exclusions are produced, because there will necessarily be always forms of experience that are overlooked. If every intersection of forms of oppression produces unique experiences, everyone will have unique things to say about a system of oppression, because every single person might live at her or his very own intersection of uncountable systems of oppression. As the perspective of intersectionality reminds us, every person always participates in different identities at the same time, some of which can be relatively privileged and others relatively disadvantaged, thus the legitimacy of speaking for someone and of forming a group out of this speakership can never be asserted simply through the assumed membership in this particular group.

Politically, this may lead to a danger of fragmentation, to the danger of losing sight of common grounds and empathic connections.²⁰ The structural internal diversity of forms of oppression and discrimination, and the ontological fundamentality of their intersection seem to challenge the formation of collectives in general. In the end, the claim might be that everyone should just speak for herself. The very own singular experience becomes, from this point of departure, the only legitimate ground for political action. However, it is hard to understand the meaning of an experience, if it is not shared or connected with others and their experiences. How should we even know about the forms of oppression that affect us and the political dimension of the experiences we make if it is not through a common politicization?²¹ And even if everyone

¹⁹ See Carastathis, "Concept of Intersectionality," 309.

²⁰ Naomi Zack, *Inclusive Feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

²¹ This is one of the important points about the idea of hermeneutical injustice, see Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). It was to be observed also within the MeToo-movement: It is through the statements of others that we may even recognize a singular experience as an experience of oppression.

speaks only for oneself, out of their own singular identity, how can we take for granted that the partiality of my speech will not hurt others (out of the privileges I unreflectively allow to take effect)? In her essay "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Linda Martín Alcoff points to this dead-end to which a fundamental critique of representation leads: speaking for oneself is still haunted by the problem of false generality and exclusion that any identity assumption and any collectivity entails:

For, in speaking for myself, I am also representing myself in a certain way, as occupying a specific subject-position, having certain characteristics and not others, and so on. In speaking for myself, I (momentarily) create my self [...] in the sense that I create a public, discursive self.²²

When we claim to speak only for ourselves, we still never say everything that *could* be said. We will not be saying random things about ourselves, but refer to specific experiences we assume to be relevant in a certain political context. To recognize and highlight this relevance, we still need to refer to a category of identity, counting on the appropriateness of this identity for those I am speaking to. Even if I claim to speak for myself only, I will potentially speak for myself *as* an immigrant or *as* a woman or *as* a non-mother, etc. (depending on what I am going to say and to whom, that is: depending on what I take to be significant in that situation). That does not only mean that I am excluding many parts of myself that could have been part of my speech but also that I might potentially be doing violence to those listening to me who also relate to a certain category of identity (for example other women) but—since they live this identity based on other intersections—would be saying completely different things about it, and yet are not speaking or are not being heard. The consequence of the necessary exclusions in speaking (politically), might then be to simply fall silent and give up any political scope for action. If the attempt at collective action and coalition building is seen to be doomed to failure anyway, we face the danger of abandoning it altogether in favor of an individualistic "narcissistic yuppie lifestyle," as Alcoff puts it.²³ If the possibility of someone standing up for someone else is strictly rejected—does one then not also give up the claim for solidarity, settling into not speaking at all, becoming politically indifferent?

Of course, this is not what theorists and practitioners of identity politics and intersectional feminism aim for. On the contrary, claims to solidarity, to listening to others and their singular experiences, and to building common grounds for collective political

²² Linda M. Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991): 10.

²³ Alcoff, "Speaking for Others," 31.

action are highly relevant to feminist epistemologies and intersectional feminism. However, my claim is that this may not be achieved if the fact that every form of representation produces and reproduces exclusions is confronted exclusively in a critical way. A critique of representation and of the false generalities it produces may not be politically sufficient to build common political grounds. Rather, based on the legitimate critique of representation and on the necessary complexity that the concept of intersectionality brought into discourse, I argue for political collectives that are based on a (practical and theoretical) reflection of the necessary fragmentation, incompleteness, and heterogeneity of any reference to identity. These collectives would take the alienation produced by any speakership as a fundamental feature of identity itself and use this insight as their ground of action. This entails more than a view on collectivity—it includes, also, the very intimate individual process of liberating oneself from the identity assumptions that are attributed to us.

4. Chicana Feminism and the Ethics, Aesthetics, and Politics of Fragmentation

It is within the context of feminist politics itself that we can gain ideas on how to build such collectivities that are not based on a claim to identity and take into account the importance of fragmented experience and difference. Primarily, I want to build on Chicana Feminism²⁴ which I see as an insightful source for such thinking. The term "Chicana," first of all, refers to Mexican women in the United States. As a self-designation within the political movement of Chicana Feminism, however, it has increasingly been used as a *particular* kind of identity category that already shows the general political gesture of Chicana Feminism: "Chicana" is a negative category, a category of non-belonging and non-fitting, it points to the experience of being a foreigner, even in the country of origin. Chicana feminism first and foremost says: "We are neither white women nor Black women nor indigenous women, neither Latinas nor U.S.-Americans." Instead of searching for further, more nuanced and specifying categories that could come to terms with this experience, the consequence drawn from here is to transform this very perspective of *non-fitting* and *non-belonging* to a political starting point and scope for action. Instead of wanting to ground a feminist movement on the assumption that there *was* such a thing as clearly definable identities and perspectives at all, here we find a notion of identity *as* negativity, a notion of identity that builds on the insight that there is no identity category that could ever "fit." Thus, political activity cannot be based on a common identity (in a positive, definable sense) but only on the maybe shared (though in singular ways) experience of non-commonality and non-fitting.

²⁴ Alma M. Garcia, "The Development of Chicana Feminist Discourse, 1970-1980," *Gender and Society* 3, No. 2 (1989).

What is searched for is a political activity that affirms, potentiates, and strengthens the ambiguities inherent in every identity formation. A clear and forceful manifestation of this negativity-based perspective on political action can be found in the writing practice of Gloria Anzaldúa which I want to focus on in the following. In her highly influential book *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* from 1987, she celebrates the in-betweenness of her position as a potential for dissolution *and* re-positioning. What she calls "The new mestiza" describes this specific political position that is gained out of non-belonging. "Mestiza" is not a category of identity but a political category: "Mestizaje" (in the sense Anzaldúa gives to it) is not a characteristic one could simply "have" but a position to be acquired, presupposing an intimate ethical-aesthetical process of transformation. It is from here—from the New Mestiza—that potential for feminist politics can be gained. The new mestiza consciousness is described in the following famous paragraph:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture [...] *Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.²⁵

Anzaldúa starts from a personal experience that is specific to her identity and standpoint. She starts by describing how she, as a woman, as a lesbian, and as a Mexican in the US, makes an experience of exclusion. This experience is described negatively, as a form of non-being (not having a country, not being at home, not being part of a culture...), but this negativity forms the source for becoming a mestiza: for new collective practices and the formation of *new* (different) belongings: "all countries", "participating in the creation of yet another culture" through an "act of kneading, of uniting." The new forms of collectivity that may arise from here are not independent of experience, they are not just freely chosen entities in which all can speak equally for an objective cause, but neither are they simply grounded in an assumed common experience. The new mestiza is a standpoint of transformation, she is characterized by the movement of transforming the in-between of the "borderland"—the situation of "being caught in the midst of ambiguities, contradictions, *and multiple possibilities*," as Mariana Ortega

²⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands. La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2012), 102–03.

puts it in her commentary on Anzaldúa²⁶—into a new understanding of (potentially collective) agency. This transformation transcends the experience of the borderland by making a claim and a point for the possibility of being someone else and of being with others that are different from me. As a form of unleashing potentialities, however, the new mestiza presupposes a transformative process herself. Being a new mestiza is not a starting point but a destination: it is the political aim that the whole book points to. To become a new mestiza, it is necessary to turn against the exclusion and oppression one is carrying inside and to create something positive out of this "inner struggle."²⁷ This realization of a possibility out of an experience of pain and struggle is a lonely process but requires a collective dimension as well.²⁸ It requires mutual support and dialogue about who we could be and whom we want to be. And it is a spiraling movement that might be never-ending: "Becoming the new mestiza is a recurrent activity. It is certainly not easy to claim *una conciencia mestiza* since it is not given to us."²⁹

This process of transformative realization may be described as a dis-identifying political subjectification,³⁰ as a way of liberating oneself from a specific claim to identity by turning it into an enhanced scope for political action. In her insightful reading of Anzaldúa, María Lugones suggests a systematization of this process by understanding the whole book as a description of this transformation that leads to the "new mestiza." According to Lugones, the chapters of the book describe phases in this process of becoming. The starting point is the phase of "intimate terror:"³¹ the experience of suffering. However, this state is not just passive suffering, it is the *active* and *conscious* experience of suffering. Intimate terror is the experience that this suffering of multiple oppressions is not just life but *oppression* and thus resistance is possible: "She cannot act, but she is active, a serpent coiled."³² Although the process of transformation is described as lonely and internal, it is already in this very first moment that the presence of others is required to help me understand my experience of suffering.

²⁶ Mariana Ortega, "Apertures of In-Betweenness, of Selves in the Middle," in *EntreMundos/ AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*, ed. Ana Louise Keating (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 79; italics mine.

²⁷ Ortega, "Apertures," 83.

²⁸ Ortega, "Apertures," 81.

²⁹ María Lugones, "From Within Germinative Stasis: Creating Active Subjectivity, Resistant Agency," in *EntreMundos/ AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*, Ana Louise Keating (ed.) (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 98.

³⁰ Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 36. See also José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999).

³¹ See Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 42–44.

³² Lugones, "Germinative Stasis," 90.

The second state is described as "Rage and Contempt" and their internalization:³³ the first attempts of activity out of conscious suffering. This activity is not communicative but a purely destructive form of desperate expressiveness.³⁴ It is an expression of not knowing where to go with my suffering, where to direct the impulse of rage. But this form of activity is exhausting and self-destructive and thus it produces a point where the outrageous Chicana just collapses, stays still, and realizes that her rage has done nothing except destroy herself. This realization enables the third and decisive "Coatlicue State," a reference to the figure of the serpent-woman, the figure that unites the contradictions.³⁵ It is the moment of realizing that the experience of the borderland not only means to carry an internal split but also to carry both sides of the border within oneself: It is an "understanding of being torn in two."³⁶ This realization entails a moment of passivity and pausing ("Coatlicue is a rupture in our everyday world"³⁷), it relies on coming back from the activity of rage. However, this passivity is linked to its own form of activity: to the internal activity of opening and transcending.

The state becomes one of germination: of feeling, sensing from within the serpent, the limits between the oppressive worlds, a coming to understand her own possibilities not through acting, but through not acting, since at this stage all acting would be oppressed activity carrying out servile intentions.³⁸

Coatlicue refers to the experience of internal alienation, of not knowing anymore who I am (or of realizing that maybe I never knew): "She has this fear that she has no names that she has many names that she doesn't know her names."³⁹ It may lead to getting lost in oneself, losing the scope of any action. However, it can also be "A Prelude to Crossing."⁴⁰ It is the precondition for building a new identity that is not identitarian (not closing into something phantasmatically factual) but directed towards new possibilities of who to be—individually and collectively: "And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually, takes dominion over serpents—over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours."⁴¹

³³ See Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 67.

³⁴ Lugones, "Germinative Stasis," 92.

³⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 69.

³⁶ Lugones, "Germinative Stasis," 94.

³⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 68.

³⁸ Lugones, "Germinative Stasis," 95.

³⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 65.

⁴⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 70.

⁴¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 73.

"Someone in me." The internal alienation of being more than one, of being always already someone else, is turned into a possibility of agency that is the agency of the new *mestiza*. But how may this turning point happen? How can the frightened look in the mirror⁴² turn into a new form of agency? There is a fourth "state" between Coatlicue and *The New Mestiza* that Lugones does not take into account but seems decisive for this turning: This is the "Shamanic State"⁴³ which could be described as the state of aesthetics meaning, for Anzaldúa, the act of writing. And here again, we find a mixture of activity and passivity, however in a reverse way to Coatlicue: Here, the focus lies on an activity that is only possible in and through a moment of holding or standing still: "I plug up my ears with wax, put on my black cloth eye-shades, lie horizontal and unmoving, in a state between sleeping and waking, mind and body locked into my fantasy. I am held prisoner by it. My body is experiencing events."⁴⁴ So much is going on while she lies there, unmovingly. She describes being "animated" or filled with stories that are stories "about shifts," as she says—and, based on this passive animation she generates an activity of selection and of creating a language to liberate the selected stories into the world. It is this aesthetic activity and expressivity what enables and holds the political subjectivity of the new *mestiza*⁴⁵—because by telling stories the experience of being many is transformed into a positive potentiality of creation. The blockage and shock of Coatlicue enable the shamanic state of writing:

And once again I recognize that the internal tension of oppositions can propel (if it doesn't tear apart) the *mestiza* writer [...] as [...] an agent of transformation, able to modify and shape primordial energy and therefore able to change herself and others into turkey, coyote, tree, or human.⁴⁶

The writer is the "agent of transformation," of transforming oneself *and* others. And herewith, we have arrived at the "amasamiento" of the new *mestiza* where this transformation is—more than a simple transformation—an "act of kneading and *uniting*," an act of becoming collective, a transformation into a political form in which others (out of their *own*, quite singular and different, transformations) can join. The fact that these transformations are singular does not mean, however, that they are not connected or don't build on or influence each other (it might not be possible to become a new

⁴² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 63.

⁴³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 91–97.

⁴⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 92.

⁴⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 92.

⁴⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 96–7.

mestiza if I am all alone trying to find my way through writing). It only means that everyone may start from a different point of departure, relying on different experiences that – in one way or another – set the whole process in motion.

For me, what is specifically interesting about the process Anzaldúa describes is how the ethical, the aesthetic, and the political are interconnected. Anzaldúa's transformation is, firstly, a very intimate one, a description of suffering and of finding ways to come along with this suffering. Secondly, one (precarious) way of embracing the ambiguities that caused the suffering, is the aesthetic practice of writing. This is not only something Anzaldúa describes as the "shamanic state," but also something expressed in the form of *Borderlands* itself: It is visible in her permanent switching between affectivity and reflection, between lyrics and essay, between obscurity and structure, and, of course, between languages. She is always exploring the spaces at the margins of understanding. Thirdly, the new mestiza can be viewed as a *political* subjectivity—political in the sense that she opens the ground for uniting with others in favor of a common work of emancipation. She is a subjectivity that, in my view, makes beautifully clear that the politics of identity may be understood not as a fixation but as a critical starting point to move beyond. However, as mentioned above, it is important to note that the whole process is not about steps that can be reached and accomplished. Rather, the three dimensions go simultaneously and it might even be that we need the third step to be able to address the first: Maybe I need political collectivities that enable me to even understand my suffering as a political question, and maybe it is only from here that it becomes possible to engage in an aesthetic practice of writing as the creation of (new) connections. Nevertheless, in my view, it is important to think of these three dimensions separately in order to maintain the difference (while connectedness) between the experience of suffering and the political subjectivity that *may* (although not necessarily) emerge from it. It is based on this difference that the freedom to become someone new and to be with others who are different from me becomes part of the whole political process. The subjectivity of the new mestiza relies on this difference and is therefore an artificial category (the new mestiza is thus located on another level than the idea of the most privileged subject of emancipation). I would therefore like to think of her as a political figure that helps find a way through the paradox of difference outlined above since she makes it possible not to search for the least alienating political expression—where speakership and collectivity must always remain problematic—but, rather, to take the alienation (from oneself) as a necessary political condition on the grounds of which new forms of collectivity and political action may be created.

This political dimension in the activity of the new mestiza can be further understood through the work of Chicana-feminist theorist Chela Sandoval and her concept

of "differential consciousness,"⁴⁷ which she sees as the specific political methodology of "US 3rd World Feminism."⁴⁸ US 3rd World Feminism was in her view more than the identity-based feminist movement of Latin American women and women of color in the US. Rather, it provides—as she states—a "particular *form*" of political action that she describes as more general and more fundamental than the movement itself and that she wishes to bring forward for other movements as well.⁴⁹ This particular form is what she labels as "differential consciousness" meaning a capacity for strategic mobility which she describes on three levels.⁵⁰ First, it is the agility between *identity* categories, the flexibility of deciding when I should speak in the name of which identity: sometimes it might be necessary to speak (generally) as a woman, and sometimes I should refer to myself as a woman of color, while sometimes it may be (even from a feminist perspective) politically more adequate not to speak as a woman at all but, rather, as, say, an academic. This may depend on what I am saying or to whom I am speaking and may change at the very next moment. The alienation and internal exclusions produced by "speaking for" as by "speaking as" someone are used strategically in their partiality. Second, it means the agility between different forms of *action*, the flexibility of deciding when we should intervene or when we should stay quiet or private; when we should be pragmatic, or when we should insist on principles. And, third, it means the agility between different political principles: equality or difference, separatism or integration, universalism or identity... This can also imply not referring to identity at all but to a general political claim.

The main idea is that with this agility also the meaning of each point of departure changes. Instead of political foundations, they become—as she says—"techniques for moving energy."⁵¹ If there is a *strategic* reference to speaking as a woman (knowing that in the next moment it may not be plausible to speak as a woman, anymore) the meaning of this "speaking as" changes: It becomes something I can consciously refer

⁴⁷ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁴⁸ For an insightful reading of Sandoval see Ruth Sonderegger, *Vom Leben der Kritik. Kritische Praktiken und die Notwendigkeit ihrer geopolitischen Situierung* (Wien: zaglossus, 2019).

⁴⁹ Chela Sandoval, "New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed," in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. C. H. Gray (New York, London: Routledge 1995).

⁵⁰ Chela Sandoval, "US Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," *Genders* 10 (1991): 15.

⁵¹ Sandoval, "US Third World Feminism," 3. Because of the denaturalizing effect and the simultaneous focus on building collectivities, Sandoval refers to her methodology as "cyborg skills" (Sandoval, "New Sciences," 408), and reversely Donna Haraway, in her "Manifesto for Cyborgs", makes strong reference to Sandoval; in *Feminism/ Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York, London: Routledge, 1990), 197–8.

to and I can take a distance from: it is not factual but political.⁵² Just as strategic as referencing this category can be dropping it. Both are political questions that depend on specific situations and contexts. The relevant point is to keep on "moving," to not close our identities, and to never be too sure about whom we mean when we speak for or as "women" or even as "women of color." This "moving energy" of politics is not simple flexibility but is rather bundled to create possibilities. It is, as she writes, not a "nomadic" but a "cinematographic" movement—that is, a movement for creating forms and images; "a motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners."⁵³ Here again, as in Anzaldúa, "alienation" becomes a (potentially) positive term, as a way of gaining a new view of one's own identity (creating irritations and thereby new understandings of ourselves and of who we *could* be). Sandoval brings the very same transformative movement that Anzaldúa describes at the individual level to a collective level and analyzes it as an explicit "methodology" of emancipatory political movements.

As part of this political methodology, Sandoval also establishes a relation between "spectators" and "practitioners"—as in the quotation above. Probably not everyone will be a practitioner all the time: sometimes some will speak and others won't and it is also part of the movement to listen and to watch as much as to consider (for oneself or deliberately) whether one feels included when others speak and what it might mean to be included. The answer to this question cannot lie in reducing difference but rather in exploring if this (necessary) difference between experience and politics may be transformed into an emancipatory form everyone would like to join in. Speaking for others, based on this view, is not only a problem but a possibility: We could seek to establish new, irritating, unregulated relations and forms of representation that are capable of revealing speakership as a *relation*, in so far as the positions (those who speak and those who are spoken for) remain ambiguous, flexible and contestable.

Where can these collectivities be found today? Can we perceive forms of their realization? Perhaps not in the way developed here—perhaps the transformations described by Anzaldúa and Sandoval, by Lugones and Ortega, must rather be understood as a call, as an inspiration to conceive feminist politics differently. At the same time, what we can find indeed are indications that this inspiration *can* possibly be realized. One of these indications might be the politics of memory against the persistence of racist and

⁵² There are obvious affinities to Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism", and Sandoval herself makes this connection: "New Sciences," 413.

⁵³ Sandoval, "US Third World Feminism," 3.

antisemitic violence in Germany. Activists, survivors, and the kins of those murdered in racist and antisemitic attacks developed forms of intervention in the politics of memory that highlighted the points of connection between their different experiences of violence and between the respective marginalization of the memory of these acts of violence within the German public sphere. Thereby, they worked together in a common anti-racist and anti-antisemitic struggle—however without blurring the differences and singularities between their forms of exposure and marginalization. In particular, the artistic and political intervention "Tribunal Unraveling NSU Complex"⁵⁴ can be understood as a sort of "amasamiento:" as the intent to make singular experiences accessible to one another through forms of story-telling in order to *build* a common ground of struggle. As Hannah Peaceman describes it: For survivors and the kins of those murdered, the Tribunal was about "opening their own stories to the stories of others and locating themselves in each other's stories. Of course, their experiences were not the same; but they shared a common attitude that they had developed out of their experiences."⁵⁵ Such practices, media, and forms of coming together, of shared remembering, and of common political struggle are what need to be sustained, acknowledged, pursued, and experimented on.

5. Conclusion

In her essay "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," Hazel Carby states that any feminist politics must begin with the question of what it means by "we."⁵⁶ This demand is as necessary as it is difficult to fulfill since posing this question must neither result in the renewed postulation of further, more differentiated "we"s (which then threaten to become closed once again) nor should it lead to a mere statement of the impossibility of saying "we" at all, thus withdrawing into an intimidated but ultimately comfortable, apolitical "I." The courage to form and maintain a feminist "we" is just as necessary as keeping open the question of what we mean by this "we."

⁵⁴ <https://www.nsu-tribunal.de/en/>.

⁵⁵ "[...] ihre eigenen Geschichten für die Geschichten anderer zu öffnen und sich selbst in der Geschichte der anderen zu verorten. Natürlich waren ihre Erfahrungen nicht die gleichen; aber sie teilten eine gemeinsame Haltung, die sie aus ihren Erfahrungen heraus entwickelt hatten." Hannah Peaceman, "Eine Utopie der Erinnerung," *taz*, August 8th, 2021. <https://taz.de/Umgang-mit-Erinnerungskultur!/5789388/>.

⁵⁶ Hazel Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference and Women's Lives*, ed. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys S. Ingraham (New York, London: Routledge, 1997), 128.

My suggestion in this article was that in Chicana feminism we find modes of navigating through this challenge. As described by Gloria Anzaldúa, alienation and exclusion are not just problems of the "we" but necessary parts of the "I," thus the critique of exclusion needs to begin as a critique of identity: Exclusionary closures do not happen only when a collective is formed but already within the formation of identities on the individual level. The difference and fragmentation within the group are reflections of internal fragmentations that are inherent to any identity whatsoever. What we can learn from Chicana feminism, therefore, is that we must abandon the hope of forming a political collective without exclusions. Rather, we should search for forms of dealing with exclusion and alienation in a productive, reflective, and strategic way. For Anzaldúa, the individual experience of alienation from oneself (which initially shows itself as suffering) can be the starting point for becoming someone else—and through this insight, it may be possible to form collectivities that do not take the supposed givenness of a collective experience as their foundation but rather the transformed subjectivity that may arise from the acknowledged impossibility of determining such a collective experience.

This is what the idea of a collectivity as "amasamiento" could mean: It would be a collective based on the *activity* of kneading or weaving from which something new might emerge that no one involved would have imagined before. Such an activity presupposes specific (collective) political methodologies and also the (individual) risky and painful transformative process that enables the new mestiza. With Chela Sandoval this activity can also be described the other way around: as the activity of searching for methods and strategies to maintain difference and mobility within the collective. This activity between difference and uniting, between alienation and solidarity, between experience and politics, can be sensed in aesthetic practices as it is in Anzaldúa's writing itself. Politically, it can show, even if possibly only momentarily, in approaches that seek to establish points of connection out of different—perhaps comparable, perhaps differing, perhaps conflicting—experiences. In my view, much can be learned from this attempt that has been brought forward by Chicana feminism. It could guide a form of intersectional feminism and the radical, emancipatory politics of identity that we still need today.

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