

On Complex Communication

MARÍA LUGONES

This essay examines liminality as space of which dominant groups largely are ignorant. The limen is at the edge of hardened structures, a place where transgression of the reigning order is possible. As such, it both offers communicative openings and presents communicative impasses to liminal beings. For the limen to be a coalitional space, complex communication is required. This requires praxical awareness of one's own multiplicity and a recognition of the other's opacity that does not attempt to assimilate it into one's own familiar meanings. Refusing the assumption of transparency and operating with relational identities, the complex communication that occurs in the limen—often invisible to dominant groups—can enable genuine coalition and effective resistance to domination.

Much organizing against oppression in the United States is still grounded in narrow understandings of the situation of the oppressed. The narrow understanding focuses on oppression as it affects the particular affiliative group of one's belonging or identity, even when the affiliative ties are thin. That group is also lived as the spring and home for shaping liberatory identities and solutions. From within this narrow understanding one does not seek deep coalitions among people who are differently oppressed at the many intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Even as coalitions of group interests are forged, they are not grounded on recognition of each other as occupying liminal sites across a host of differences. Rather, as resistance continues to be motivated mostly by narrow understandings of our own situations, we inhabit these very enclosures as liminal sites. Liminality in these instances is itself understood narrowly as a standing outside or away from power narrowly conceived. We do not count on people outside our own affiliative groups for recognition of ourselves as resistant. The logic of narrow identity is one that has been transgressed in the United States enduringly and systematically only by those whose self-understanding

centers the identity “women of color,” an identity that has always been unstable, always struggling against the narrower senses of identity. So, much organizing against oppression does not depend or ground itself on coalition, particularly deep coalition. I have argued elsewhere that grounding liberatory struggle on narrow circles of resistance and recognition colludes with the logic of divide and conquer, and the logic of fragmentation. So, I think we need to move to coalition, yet this step has proven exceedingly difficult on two counts: it requires recognition of the intersectionality of oppressions as real and important for struggle and it requires a movement outward toward other affiliative groups recognized as resistant. Both of these moments of recognition are exceedingly difficult to achieve. I do not see enough theorists, activists, and popular educators devoted to this question of barriers to coalition, in particular, the communicative side of the issue.

But there has been some emphasis on coalition in theoretical exploration. Maybe understanding some of the shortcomings of these explorations can give direction to organizing. There is an unspoken presupposition in theoretical exploration of coalitions of the oppressed that if we only could meet each other in a liminal space outside the hardenings and crystallizations of structure, a space marked by transgression, a standing outside the bourgeois public, away from power in its dominating face, then we would be semiotically transparent to each other. Here, I am exploring that presupposition, what I think is true in it and what is not: the extent to which liminality is both a communicative opening and a communicative impasse. Here, I begin to articulate the exercise of complex communication that will provide a way out of the impasse. Humberto Maturana’s work suggests to me that an openness to the interlocutors as real—rather than a shared vocabulary—is a central condition for communication. Real, that is, not a figment of my imagination nor completely foreign. The sense of coalition I have in mind is a demanding one. It contrasts with the temporary, epistemically shallow sense of coalition based on coincidence of interests.

The presupposition is backed up by a sense that in the limen, to the extent that we lie outside structural descriptions, we are neither in the presence of power nor related to each other in terms of power. Since it is domination that creates barriers to intelligibility, then when we are conceptually outside domination, all barriers to intelligibility are gone. This is, I think, a familiar and important argument. In many ways, it is a separatist argument. The problem with this version of the argument is that none of us really gets to occupy a liminal space that is so barely described. We need to add to the conceptual shift from domination both the spatiality and historicity of the journey that leads us to a limen. Once we understand the journey, we can move away from a bare liminal description of others and ourselves.

What constitutes a bare liminal description as both bare and liminal is that in it we—the oppressed, whether as subordinate or cast out—are neither caught nor reduced, our agency and subjectivity not erased by power. That is, to place ourselves in the limen, in a borderland, is to conceive of “ourselves” as not exhausted by domination. But this is not quite a description. It is an abstract gesture. We do not really get to *conceive* ourselves, selves that must be dramatically different from ourselves as produced by domination. We cannot do so because the ingredients for the description do not arise from the conceptual shift. Indeed, as liminal we need to engage in a poiesis, a self-construction, an arduous and dangerous process. Ralph Ellison (1972) led us to see how difficult it is for African Americans to leap out of spaces marked over and over by racialized power, or by race as a form of power. The Invisible Man ends up alone, his liminal space a basement, powerfully lit with electricity illegally drawn from the Monopolated Light and Power Company.

Writers of liminality see portals to the limen in particular positive inhabitations of ourselves, positivities at which we could not have arrived in the dominator's cradle. Something about us places us beyond the reach of oppressive, paralyzing, demeaning, reductive descriptions. For some it is the identity lesbian that places us at the limen; for others, it is a question of historicized identities, a combination of the construction of home places and of struggling in infrapolitical spaces. For some, it is the capacity for choice, the choice to seek one's subjectivity against all odds. In each of these journeys, the key that opens the door to the limen is not resistance to oppression per se, but rather resistance to particular forms of oppression at particular times in particular spaces. The spatialities and times of liminality are particular. Since our journeys to the limen are different, often at odds, often in great tension given that we are among each other's oppressors, the freeing spaces where we attempt to chisel our own faces are not readily accessible to each other.

We can, and many of us do, take the stance of being against all oppression. We may then be tempted to say that we inhabit *the* limen, one that is both the result of and constituted by our placing ourselves against all oppression, not just the oppressor outside of us but also the oppressor in ourselves. Theorists of coalition recognize that it is possible to be disloyal to the dominator in one self as well as the dominated. It is possible to stand against all oppression. But if this is a conceptual move, it will not do. We can read it as either describing a direction to be struggled for or an accomplishment. In either case, we cannot presuppose the journey across liminal sites that constitutes the liminal *coalitional* space. The move that by standing against all oppression we get to inhabit *the* limen, is one that makes the communicative presupposition. The negotiation of communicative difficulties is occluded rather than resolved. A coalitional limen, or borderlands, is one that is achieved, and the achievement is both

intercommunal and communicative. The communication in question is complex. We need to focus on the negotiation of communicative difficulties and on the characteristics of the liminal that make that negotiation possible. A coalitional limen is not something we get to by presupposing that the liminal site is empty of all power. Our focus is indeed how to accomplish a coalitional limen.

So, what is it about this presupposition that makes sense? The presupposition, again, is that in the liminal, border-dwelling situation, the oppressed will understand each other even though their struggles against various forms of oppression have mostly led them to look inward, to their group of narrow resistant identity. Liminality necessitates some level of awareness of domination and of resistance to domination—at least a praxical not necessarily articulate level, that is, one that informs action. This accompanies the sense of self as an active subject that marks the inhabitation of the limen. Domination constructs the oppressed subject as either invisible, not within the bounds of normalcy (that is, without structural description or one as insane or deviant), as inferior, or as threatening because not ruled from within by modern rationality. At the same time, many oppressed people stand against oppression socially within circles of recognition of oppression: people have a vocabulary for what the oppressor does to the oppressed, a shared wisdom about the shortcomings of the oppressor and the ways in which the oppressor is poised to use power. So, against the oppressive descriptions of reality, all these oppositional constructions by the oppressed create a clear sense of standing in a dual reality, one in which we use double perception and double praxis. One eye sees the oppressed reality, the other sees the resistant one.

The resistant oppressed develop knowledge to deal with the oppressive reality. We have maxims to deal with men, for example, that condense the wisdom of women all over the globe, maxims that do not necessarily speak to each other knowingly, but nevertheless recognize that there is more than one reality and that women cross back and forth between them. The same is true of racialized subjects dealing with the *huero*, the cracker, the white man. In 1873, Wong Sam and Assistants complied and got Wells Fargo to publish a Chinese/English phrase book and to distribute it throughout the West in towns where Chinese immigrants worked. The phrase book “contained strategies and tactics for business and criminal law, and for dealing with white people in general.” It contained “sets” that could be memorized quickly. They were “fun to recite” and they were “internalized by the time a Chinaman had his first experience with a white man.” Frank Chin advises us to try these phrases out loud and “it will be instantly apparent that Wong Sam and assistants’ tactics and strategies for dealing with the white man’s application of the law do not include submission, acculturation, or assimilation” (Chin 1991). As a person of color in the United States, you learn these maxims to deal with white supremacy in rather

narrow enclaves. So, liminality necessitates at least praxical awareness of our own multiplicity.

We must develop a double vision arrived at through “world”-travel or else we will be zombified by the oppressor’s imaginative construction of us. Multiple consciousness (Matsuda 1996) or “world”-travel (Lugones 2003) are methodologies that enable us to shift to the liminal by reading reality as multiple. That we “world”-travel does not guarantee that we have a metalevel of consciousness of inhabiting the limen. Nevertheless, as we exercise double vision, it is clear that this gives us a way of rejecting the reality of the oppressor as true even when we recognize that it rules our lives, even from the inside. To reject it is not to diminish one’s sense of its power, but it is a call not to be consumed by it. It is also a call that many of us hear as a revolutionary call, a call to dismantle oppressive reality. But the inhabitation of the limen is not a revolutionary move, it is rather a preparation, a creative preparation. The creation of liminal spaces involves this going back and forth from domination, negotiating that movement so as to maximize our freedom in an unfree situation. All of this, so far, is not about coalition but about reconstituting oneself as active. But it is here that we should see the need for coalition: a loving connection toward liberation.

So, what is plausible about the presupposition that if I stand in the limen with others we will be semiotically transparent to each other? Recognition of another as liminal, as standing in a borderlands, is a necessary condition for reading their words and gestures differently. If I think you are in a limen, I will know that, at least some of the time, you do not mean what you say but something else. Sometimes, it is the form of what you say that conveys most of the meaning, a form in sharp contrast with the dominant mainstream. But it is not a question merely of the meaning of words. To understand that you are in a limen is to understand that you are not what you are within a structure. It is to know that you have ways of living in disruption of domination. That is, in my mind, a very good beginning toward understanding your liminal world. So, though it is not true that if we stand together in the limen we will understand each other, we can make the weaker claim that if we recognize each other as occupying liminal sites, then we will have a disposition to read each other away from structural, dominant meaning, or have good reason to do so as oppressed peoples. What we need then is both to be able recognize liminality and to go from recognition to a deciphering of resistant codes.

CONCRETE JOURNEYS INTO THE LIMEN

Gloria Anzaldúa makes the presupposition in its stronger sense of communicative transparency in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). She describes the borderlands as a vague and undetermined space. She tells us that this region is inhabited by all of those who cross over the confines of the normal (*atravezados/as*). She

leaves us with a sense that so barely described, the *atravezados/as* will understand each other. But she does not pursue the matter. Rather, she describes one journey to the borderlands, her own, very specifically. Anzaldúa superimposes the materiality and spatiality of this borderland onto the U.S.–Mexican border, which she constitutes as a rejection of both terms of the divide. The borderland as constituted *conceptually* by Anzaldúa is a rejection of dichotomies and of the dichotomizing impulse that constitutes the border, the split. Even the rejection of dichotomizing, that is the limen in its conceptual sense, is historicized since she connects it to the historical conquests of 1492 and 1848. She associates the dichotomizing impulse rather tightly with European modernity.

But the limen, the borderlands is also constituted *culturally* and *historically* in Anzaldúa as a recovery of memory: she writes in *tliilli tlapalli*, in the red and black ink. Her writing is image-full, pictographic. It is a writing of stories that are not textual. They are acts encapsulated in time. She writes not in the sense of interpreting or representing the world. Rather, like the *tlamatinime*, the Mexica wise men, she enacts, performs, lively creations and re-creations, re-creations of her own self. These are in the world, but they are in the liminal world, the space in between structural descriptions. Given the structural descriptions, she is a subordinate being, absent of responsibility. Her storytelling is the mechanism to enter the borderlands. She is both *tlacuilo* and *tlamatinime*. In her description, we see two steps that in her personal case are deeply intertwined, but which are left abstract in the case of other *atravezados*: On the one hand, the limen is understood not just as outside of power but outside that particular version of power which dichotomized subject/object, male/female, reason/passion, nurturance/desire. This I understand as the conceptual move. But then the limen is wrought from her own hands, from a deep creative impulse that sees in her collective memory as a Chicana a fountain for a poesis that is against the grain of modern power.

So, in Anzaldúa's case, her own claim that we will meet in the borderlands, *all of us who cross over the confines of the normal*, succeeds in preparing one aspect of this terrain: the liminal as not dichotomized. The bare description includes "beyond the confines of the normal" and not governed by dichotomies. These are of course, tightly connected in her work. But we only understand fully, the embodied history, the materiality, the richness of description in the particular, highly historicized case. She presents us a being highly unfamiliar, herself as the Mesoamerican serpent. She introduces her to us in various moments of her continuous remaking. In some of those moments, she is open to conversation with the *atravezados/as*, open to complex communication. The particular openness is expressed as a willingness to traverse each other's collective memories as not quite separate from each other and as containing the stuff that she may incorporate into her own recreation. The new mestiza is a scavenger of collective memories, memories that she does not see as completely discontinuous

with her own. This to me is a very important ingredient of Anzaldúa's story. It is the coalitional gesture; it begins to provide an understanding of complex communication.

Anzaldúa engages us in thinking about communication in liminal sites. Though I think she makes the presupposition that in the borderlands the *atravezados/as* are communicatively transparent to each other, the focus of her meditation is not on communication among the *atravezados*. Rather she communicates to us her own journey and her inhabitation of the limen thickly, the whole process of transformation, the way of life. The communication of her own transformation does not make the presupposition of transparency. Instead, she offers us her own transformation in a communicative gesture that enacts a complex communication. She signals to us a desire for communication by presenting herself as an intercultural interlocutor, one that moves resistantly against the U.S.–Mexico border. She also presents herself as interested in our own disruptions and the memories that have led to them. Or, at least, she can be taken that way. Keeping that possibility in our ears adds layers to our communication. She accomplishes that by enacting a critique of colonial modernity. The critique is lived as self-transformative. She metamorphoses in front of our eyes. The communication is complex since in asking for a response, it does rule out reduction, translation, and assimilation. Understanding her journey requires a significant extension of my own intercultural journey. I see then a coalitional communicative gesture in her story and in her openness to collective memories that back and form the ground for our resistances.

Alfred Arteaga explains the relation between power and intelligibility linguistically in the case of internal colonization. His way of understanding the barriers to intelligibility in contexts of gross imbalances of power is through the logic of monologism. He sees the violent employment of a monologic discourse as common to all conquest and domination of one people by another. Chicano speech and Chicano subjects are rendered alien by the “centripetal forces of monologism that strive to locate the Self at the center and to locate the Other at the margins. The Other is contained linguistically and spatially, on reservations, in barrios, colonies, far from the centers of the colonizer” (Arteaga 1996, 16). As in other forms of construction of barriers to intelligibility through domination, the colonizer's language and discourse are elevated to the status of arbiter of truth and reality: “The world comes to be as the authoritative discourse says,” and “discursive practice functions as the means to order colonial relations and establish the meaning of those relations” (16). The communicative situation is complicated by auto-colonization: “The dominant discourse has such authority that it becomes adopted in varying degrees by the colonized subject” (16).

The monologism of the colonizer is a way of silencing all contestatory interlocution. There is no place for conversation that includes the colonized tongue—the one you and I hold in our mouths—as a centrifugal force altering

the society's language and its map of reality. Thus the Chicana's resistance is exercised from outside a shared linguistic domain. That resistance, that tongue-lashing, places her in a borderlands, a limen. As colonized subjects are rendered alien and contained both spatially and linguistically in barrios and on reservations, these become liminal sites for the fashioning of intensely contestatory speech. Arteaga understands Chicanismo as a dialogic resistance to a domination that creates barriers to intelligibility. Chicanismo as dialogic resistance disrupts the communicative barrier without necessarily securing intelligibility in any transparent sense. Arteaga portrays the Chicano as an intercultural polyglot. Polyglossia is a *form* whose logic is intensely dialogic. What is dialogized is the Anglo-American monologue.

I think we can understand the Chicana speaking her intercultural polyglossia from within a limen but transgressing that limen's limits toward other linguistic domains. Arteaga's piece does not address the coalitional issue. It is rather narrowly focused on the Anglo-Chicano/a relation. But his analysis is very suggestive to me, since it immediately suggests this most subversive possibility of metacommunication across liminal sites. The metacommunication hinges on the form of the speech and it calls for, maybe even attracts or inspires, a transgressive hearing from within other transgressive enclaves.

We can understand the speech as directed only to disrupting the Anglo-American monologue. This is Arteaga's own understanding, though I think in his case this also involves an inward intercultural intersubjective conversation that takes place in a limen. The vocabulary of liminality is mine. I am wondering about the site of formation of the contestatory discourse. There are then at least two conversations here occurring at once, through one speech act. In one, the intended form of the speech is that of an oppositional address to the colonizer. In the other, the intersubjective conversation, the form of the speech marks liminality, marks a portal to life lived differently, nonmonologically, interculturality. The form of address in each case is very different.

One is frankly, aggressively, confrontational in both its form and message. It addresses the colonizer as reducing the colonized through monologue. That address dialogizes the colonizer's monologue through direct and defiant interpellation, but without an intention of communicating anything other than that disruption. The *message* is *about* the colonizer but it is directed inward, to the companions in the intercultural dialogue. This form stands defiant to the colonizer's muting of the communicative possibilities. In the second conversation, the speech act is addressed inwardly, *intersubjectively*, as confrontational to domination. The speaker addresses other intercultural polyglots as jointly fashioning the message and its form and directing it to the colonizer. We speak to power backed up, grounded, in each other's meaning. The confrontation is accomplished through a dialogical, collective creation of the particular message and of the particular form of the address. The interlocution is inward in

its being forged intersubjectively, but outward in its direction. It communicates through both form and message. The second conversation, though in a sense it is addressed to power, is still liminal because it is infrapolitical. It is spoken meaningfully and relishing full understanding only among those creating an intercultural dialogic disruption of the Anglo-American monologue, one that accompanies the intersubjectivity of narrow identities.

I want to suggest a concomitant third conversation, a third form, a coalitional form also spoken from within this limen. The speech in this case is also powerfully announcing the disruption of monologism through intercultural polyglossia. But it may be both meant for and heard by someone oppressed who is also reduced by the oppressor through monologism but whose resistance arises from other dialogues. It may be meant as inviting by those seeking the disruptions of the monologisms that intersect their own communicative gestures. It may be found inspiring. It is this third form of conversation through one speech act that I am adding to Arteaga's other two. In the coalitional form, we communicate to other intercultural resisters something that says, "We live among colonizers, let's disrupt the monologism by extending the intercultural polyglossia toward a far more subversive conversation." Here, it is the form of the speech, its polyglossia, that communicates with other intercultural polyglots, and it may be both meant and heard as an invitation to open up, to complicate, the polyglossia.

Yotl recordotl el tonatiuh
 en mi boca cochi
 cihuatl, nahuatl
 teocalli, my mouth
 micca por el English
 e hiriendo mi español,
 ahora cojo ando en caló
 pero no hay pedo
 porque todo se vale
 con o sin safos.
 (Burciaga, *Poemas en tres idiomas y caló*).

COMPLEX COMMUNICATION

So, what is false about the presupposition that in the limen the oppressed will be semiotically transparent to each other? The presupposition is false since there is not one limen where we get to meet as a matter of course as we resist oppression. Rather, the different journeys that we have taken to liminal sites have constituted each limen as a different way of life, not reducible to the other resistant, contestatory ways of life. To assume transparency then is to reproduce the communicative problem imposed by the various forms of power that oppress

us. It reproduces the problem since it necessitates unacknowledged reductions, translations, assimilations.

What is true about the presupposition? We know that liminal lives are led and created against the grain of dominating power. If we know that about each other, we have good reason not to assimilate what we hear and see to the oppressor's meaning or to our own. If we recognize liminality in others and in ourselves and if we recognize a need for company and for coalition then we can decide to enter a conversation with other liminals that is not a liberal conversation. Liberal conversation thrives on transparency and because of that it is monologized. Complex communication thrives on recognition of opacity and on reading opacity, not through assimilating the text of others to our own. Rather, it is enacted through a change in one's own vocabulary, one's sense of self, one's way of living, in the extension of one's collective memory, through developing forms of communication that signal disruption of the reduction attempted by the oppressor. Complex communication is creative. In complex communication we create and cement relational identities, meanings that did not precede the encounter, ways of life that transcend nationalisms, root identities, and other simplifications of our imaginations.

Humberto Maturana reads the story of the Tower of Babel in a way that is useful to us at this point. The Christian Holy Book has it that the Tower of Babel was being built so as to reach heaven. The Christian god disrupted that project by disrupting the original, unified language. God produced a division among people by creating linguistic division. Maturana suggests that the introduction of the seventy-two languages will not have created the division unless one adds a disposition against understanding each other's ways of life. It is this disposition, an openness to learn each other's meaning that we are often lacking and that we need to understand each other in a coalitional limen. As Maturana thinks of language as an act, to language, and he thinks of that act as an aspect of a way of life, we can think of complex communication as occurring among intercultural polyglots who are disposed to understand the peculiarities of each other's resistant ways of living.

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