

Mestiza Consciousness and the Logics of Classification: A response to Texas Transformations

Scout Calvert, PhD.

What can library and information scientists learn about their apparatuses for organization from Gloria Alzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness*, from the consciousness of the borderlands? The organizing impulse is perhaps second for library and information scientists after the conjoined and contradictory impulse for hoarding and sharing. Categorizing, naming, and describing are power-laden practices we cannot do without. Each schema reveals its priorities, and legitimizes, delegitimizes, and renders visible or invisible the knowledge it contains or excludes. As Foucault insists, libraries are places that "record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation" (129). The fantasy of classification is a system that neatly contains all of its objects with no residuum. The category "not elsewhere classified" is a catch-all in service of this fantasy. If all things fit in the system, it has the appearance of universal; if the system appears universal, things that do not fit are difficult to detect or cognize in the system or in the world.

Mestiza consciousness is both like this residuum and unlike it. On the one hand, hybrid ways of being, acting, knowing, and living in the world are frequently described as "other" or "none of the above." On the other hand, the apparatus of power that is classificatory systems may not even reckon with what is impure, mestiza, hybrid. Whereas what is hybrid and impure may be monstrous in the epistemologies of power, and may experience heightened visibility—scrutiny, study, problematization, pity—the actuality of the lived concerns and experiences of those in the borderlands are typically invisible to the knowledge practices of power. This is captured in Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," the gendered power to see without being seen that renders women to-be-looked-at, but not agents in the narrative. Mulvey's psychoanalytic film theory has been widely reworked to understand the power of white, male, and colonial invisibilities, not just in film. Here, what is visible is "marked" or problematized, and what is invisible is "unmarked" and passes without being suspect.

The power to see without being seen is also the power to determine what can be seen. We see this in some of the binaries that Alzaldúa synthesizes in her bid to "break down subject-object duality" and "uproot dualistic thinking" (80): white/color, male/female, subject/object. Add to these, pure/impure, rational/emotional, science/society, civilized/primitive, and a host of others analyzed by Donna Haraway, and other feminists, critical race scholars, and postcolonial theorists. In each pair, the privileged term is subject, has agency and self-determination. The second term is what's been called "the constitutive outside." As the negation or opposite of the privileged term, it must stand in for what the "unmarked" class is not, thereby becoming "locked in a duel with the oppressor" who has the power to define and render invisible the specificities and lived experiences of marked classes. These actualities are invisible to the knowledge practices of power; they are, to use Leigh Star's phrase, orphans of infrastructure.

Mestiza consciousness defies notions of purity, embraces contradiction and messy hybridity, to break down binary categories and dualistic thinking that undergird the legacies of European rationality and power relations. "It is not enough to stand on the opposite riverbank," says Alzaldúa (78), to simply embrace the disfavored term in each binary; simple reversals won't work. Switching polarity to privilege the Other in a binary pair doesn't fix the problems of dualistic thinking, of category systems that insist on no remainder, no matter the violence done to those beings and ideas being categorized. Valorizing feminine over

masculine, black over white, nurture over nature, emotion over reason leaves those logics intact. What mestiza consciousness calls for is intersectionality, the crossing of cultures, a kind of ethical and epistemological stance and an identity drawn from life in the borderlands. This isn't as simple solution. Anzaldúa asks, "which collectivity does the daughter of the darkskinned mother listen to?" (78). Mestiza consciousness, the breakdown of dualities, of category systems that rely on purity, eschews either/or, and welcomes hybridity, both/and, which invoke painful *nepantlism*, being torn between ways. As Anzaldúa puts it, there is a "conscious rupture" from oppressive culture (82) that is necessary for self-determination and enables remembering that things "might have been otherwise" as Susan Leigh Star (41) and other feminists have described it, which is necessary in order to form Anzaldúa's "new images of identity" (87) out of "splintered and disowned parts" (88). From holding hybrid, contradictory histories and identities together in tension, mestiza *consciousness* emerges, not merely an identity, but a subject position from which new knowledges can emerge.

For library and information scientists, the labor of knowledge work is no trivial matter. Yet media, or knowledge forms, proliferate abundantly in a digital era, in which certain crucial material limitations for producing media have been radically eased. The impulse of these scientists to hoard/share is in constant tension with the epistemological work of categorization and classification. Because this labor has largely been rendered invisible in part due to the historical (and ongoing) of feminization of the field, organizing schemas and taxonomies have neither been subject to the same degree of critical scrutiny as other knowledges have, nor has LIS knowledge work been generally acknowledged for the intense expertise required to enact it. LIS organizing practice has thereby suffered. The work of Anzaldúa and her fellow travelers in understanding subjugated epistemologies, including (but by no means limited to) Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Audre Lorde, Donna Haraway, and Susan Leigh Star is a gift to scientists in this field.

Haraway and Star, interpreters and givers of forms of mestiza consciousness, also understand how hybridity, power, and messy categories play out through the technology systems that present these recent (in the long view only) tensions and dilemmas for library and information scientists. What new experiments will flow from Star's recognition that things could have been (and so could become) different, or Haraway's cyborg hybridity? Can, to use librarian Audre Lorde's phrase, the master's tools dismantle the master's house? Can the technologies and epistemologies that have been used to organize thinking about the world in one way successfully uproot that way?

Four iterations of an organizing scheme explore this problem in a small film media collection, with 50 objects in it. Three teams of scientists had the ability to deploy categories, tags, and lists, to create three transformations of the original collection's organizing principles. The purpose of each transformation was to explore the experience of the residual in this collection.

The original organizing scheme for the collection seemed generic, offering six overarching categories, each divided by another handful of subcategories. Although the first category, Texas, names a state, the subcategories are not Texas-specific. The last category, Texas Region, specifies actual regions in the state, but the organizing logic is not Texas-specific. Thus, the original collection, from which the three transformations are improvised, attempts a universality that has the potential to suppress Texas-specific phenomena. On the superficial view, we don't know if or what this system might render invisible; such is the power of our categories to control the very terms with which we are able to think. The experiments with this collection thus provide the opportunity for "recovering multivocality" (Bowker and Star, 41). In so doing, will the transformations enact residuality, and if so, how?

The project *Kaleidoscopic Texas* divvies the collection up by three main categories, at least partially implied by the content of the media themselves, subdivided by almost a score of additional categories. Thus, the heading Actors includes not just categories of human film actors, but other beings and inanimate objects that apparently are agents in the film. The categories are overlapping, non-hierarchical: “animals” and “livestock”; “women & children” and “youth.” They are also non-symmetrical. Do the categories cowboys, executives, journalists, and soldiers stand in for the absent category “men,” leaving it unmarked, seeing without being seen? Three of four objects marked “cowboy” were also marked “human”; Three of six marked “women & children” were also marked “human.” Is “cowboy” a subset of human? Are “women & children” human? Or does “human” mean *Homo sapiens*, not elsewhere classified? Which is the residual category?

Under the main category Era, *Kaleidoscopic Texas* offers another score of recognizable historical eras, and some that might count as *epistemes*, as much more rough periods qualified by cultural organization or modes of thought, like “truthiness” or “melting pot.” The main category Technique includes both filmic techniques and concepts like animation, montage, and time lapse, as well as affective techniques like sarcasm and intimacy. Three collections gather films in groups “Regret & Fear,” “Timelessness in Texas,” “Humans and People,” each perhaps permutations on Technique, Era, and Actors.

A Post-Texas Index uses four primary categories to organize the collection: Actions (subdivided by categories that are verbs), Actors, Participants, and Recipients. The latter three categories subdivided by the same 10 terms—except the category Recipients, which lacks a “woman” subcategory. The organizing principle rejects a Texas-specific identity for the collection in favor of an austere schema suggested by film genre: “action” and “actors”. Actions is filled with verbs; the remaining three categories divide by nouns, both living and nonliving entities. An ambiguity emerges: do only actors act, or do participants and recipients act as well? Are recipients the objects of actions, or receivers of other nouns? How are actors, participants, and recipients agents and not agents?

Three collections gather some of the media across categories: A man speaking; Without Actors; Natural Resources. Without Actors includes one film that is classified under Actors, and it is unclear how Natural Resources gathers films differently than the subcategory Natural resource.

Here in Texas plays with Texas-specificity. Three categories deal with degrees of ubiquity, including Nowhere (in Texas) with its almost complete set of empty subcategories like “Apologies,” “Integration,” and “Socialism.” The subcategory “Sarcasm” has three offerings, commentaries on Texas politics apparently originating outside of Texas. Somewhere (in Texas) also offers a host of empty categories, including “Biracial people,” “Intellectuals,” and “Pride parades” (though several, like “Coastline” and “Liberals” do have offerings). Do we learn here that these things exist somewhere in Texas, but that no representatives exist in the collection, or that these empty sets simply can’t be found in Texas?

Four more categories, in addition to the first three main categories, deal with Texas things: characters, colors, doings, and values. The subcategories appear to be drawn from the Texan context, for example: “Cowboys,” “Immigrants,” “Tejanos”; “Denim,” “Drab,” “Yellow”; “Competing,” “Rebelling,” “Wrangling”; “Exceptionalism,” “Grit,” “Self-Interest.” The collections Here and everywhere and Nowhere but here address aspects of Texas exceptionalism. *Here in Texas* was the only collection with tagged items, offering a supplemental scheme of 6 somewhat inscrutable on-the-fly categories.

Exploring the schema for these collections provoked the question, what does it or would it mean to foreground the experience of the residual, to enact mestiza consciousness? On the one hand, this could mean highlighting or bringing residual categories to the surface, rendering visible what had been invisible and pushing prominent false universals into the background. Or it could mean wiping away previous techniques for dividing and describing, and substituting another set of categories that don't easily map to the first, eliminating the residuum of the old order, while necessarily creating new residual categories. Or it could mean engaging with fraught, Scylla-and-Charybdis overlaps and hybridities, without attempting to smooth over contradictions. This induces tensions for library and information scientists, whose first impulse is utility and helpfulness, and whose guiding principle and Enlightenment inheritances has been the quest for universality.

All three of the transformations play with this in different ways and to different degrees. All reject familiar generic conventions, but necessarily replace them with a universal of local application. That is, the categories appear to organize all of the items in the collection, and if they do not, it is not obviously apparent. If any of the teams chose to demonstrate the experience of what Bowker and Star called "torque" and exclusion of the residual by blocking access and positive identity, it was difficult to detect; for example, was the elimination from *A Post-Texas Index* of "Woman" from the category "Recipients" an oversight, an intentional effort to didactically erase "Woman," or an purposeful refusal to make "Woman" the object (or recipient) of action in this schema?

Kaleidoscopic Texas foregrounded residual categories of the *je ne sais quoi* of affective and epistemic content that often go unclassified; affect is too thin, too subjective to calcify into a category. It abundantly uses its categories in a way that offers a kaleidoscopic shuffling and reshuffling of the items.

A Post-Texas Index wipes away content-specific main categories and uses especially generic subcategories, pulling the carpet of familiarity out from under users. All previous typical organizing principles have become residuum in this system.

Here in Texas overtly uses its categories to the address political, historical, and cultural specificities of Texas. The categories are an explicit comment on Texas and remind us that all category systems are commentaries.

All three projects enact aspects of residuality, and each do it differently. Would any change in classification create this experience? All three projects involved consciously using metadata to manipulate the organizing apparatus and produce versions of residuality. The premise of the experiment relies on *words*, those value-laden components of language that also serve as categories and moor us in the symbolic, to effect the transformations of the collection. Those words are connected to logics of organization, but they are speakable, and however vague or imbued with meaning, visible. What remained invisible and universal across the transformations was the infrastructure of the search mechanism itself, and this is where the experience of the residual was most intense. Whereas each transformation used categories that were not mutually exclusive, offering the possibility of hybridity, even if not a distorted one, the "refine results" engine on each Search/Browse Results screen forces a refinement that is mutually exclusive. Users can select from pre-determined ranges of duration and then one and only one subcategory from each of the categories provided by the transformation. Here, apparent seamlessness and universality with the veneer of helpfulness enforce purity, deny multivocality, hide the residuum produced, and exclude hybridity.

The refinement engine is an artifact of the experiment. It is outside the scope of the experimental task for the teams. However, it is an important reminder that power, oppression, and epistemologies are not only derived from the labels we put on things—

sometimes pejorative, sometimes falsely universal, sometimes misnomers—but the organizing logics that are and remain invisible even when we change our words for things or substitute new sets of categories.

Bibliography

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. “La Conciencia De La Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness.” In *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 77–99. San Francisco: Aunt Lute.
- Bowker, Geoffrey C, and Susan Leigh Star. 1999. *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. Inside Technology. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1976. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Haraway, Donna J. 1991. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna J. 1991. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 110–113. Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press.
- Mulvey, Laura. 2004. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 837-848. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Star, Susan Leigh. 1991. “Power, Technology and the Phenomenology of Conventions: On Being Allergic to Onions.” In *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination*, edited by John Law, 26–56. London: Routledge.