

Literacy in the Works of Gloria Anzaldúa and Amy Tan

Posted on October 2, 2019

Introduction

Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" and Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue" challenge the idea that literacy means mastering one standardized form of English and leaving other languages behind. Both writers describe how language is judged through race, immigration, class, education, and institutional power. They also show that the speech dismissed as broken, accented, mixed, or improper can carry family intimacy, cultural memory, and intellectual complexity. Their essays do not present literacy primarily as blending invisibly into dominant society. They redefine it as the ability to move among language communities while understanding how standards are created and whose voices they privilege. Language becomes both a practical skill and a site of identity. (Anzaldúa, 2012; Tan, 1990)

Literacy beyond Reading and Writing

Traditional definitions describe literacy as the ability to read and write, but the two essays reveal a broader social practice. People learn how to speak, interpret tone, tell stories, translate institutions, shift registers, and recognize which language forms carry authority in a particular setting. Literacy also involves understanding when one's speech will be respected, corrected, or ignored. Standard English can provide access to education and employment, yet its prestige is not evidence that other varieties lack grammar or meaning. Anzaldúa and Tan demonstrate multiple literacies: family literacy, community literacy, academic literacy, bilingual literacy, and rhetorical awareness. Their competence lies partly in knowing how these forms interact and where their social values differ. (Anzaldúa, 2012; García & Wei, 2014; Tan, 1990)

Anzaldúa and the Borderlands of Language

Anzaldúa writes from the linguistic borderlands of the United States and Mexico, where Spanish, English, Chicano Spanish, regional forms, and mixed practices meet. Her language reflects histories of conquest, migration, schooling, labor, and community formation. Authorities often demand a clean separation between English and Spanish, but her experience does not fit that division. Chicano Spanish is not failed Spanish or careless English. It is a living language shaped by people whose identities developed in a border region. By moving among languages within the essay, Anzaldúa makes readers experience linguistic plurality rather than receiving it as an abstract argument. Form

and content therefore perform the same political work. (Anzaldúa, 2012; García & Wei, 2014)

The Attempt to Tame the Tongue

The metaphor of taming describes social efforts to discipline speech and, through speech, discipline identity. Anzaldúa recalls correction in educational and cultural settings where particular accents or word choices were treated as evidence of deficiency. Such language policing communicates that belonging depends on sounding like the dominant group. It can produce shame, silence, or hyperawareness even when the speaker communicates effectively. Anzaldúa refuses the assumption that institutional approval should determine whether her home languages are legitimate. Her resistance does not deny the usefulness of learning standard forms. It rejects the demand that acquiring them requires contempt for the language through which family and community experience have been organized. (Anzaldúa, 2012; Flores & Rosa, 2015)

Language and Chicana Identity

For Anzaldúa, language and identity cannot be separated easily. An attack on a person's language may be experienced as an attack on the community and history carried by that language. This relationship explains why correction can feel more serious than a technical grammar lesson. Names, idioms, sounds, and code-switching connect speakers to places and relationships that standardization cannot replace. At the same time, communities also police language internally by deciding who sounds too American, too Mexican, too educated, or insufficiently authentic. Anzaldúa's border identity is therefore pressured from several directions. Her essay creates a position in which mixed language is not a failure to choose but an honest expression of a historically mixed life. (Anzaldúa, 2012)

Tan's Different Englishes

Amy Tan begins from the discovery that she uses several forms of English according to audience and relationship. The polished language associated with lectures and publication differs from the English she speaks with her mother and husband. The family form is not meaningless or careless; it carries shared history, affection, and efficient understanding. Tan's reflection reveals that speakers do not possess one fixed voice. They make rhetorical choices, often without conscious planning, based on intimacy, purpose, and social expectation. Her essay also challenges the idea that a writer's authority depends on speaking the same way in every context. Linguistic flexibility is evidence of competence, although institutions often recognize only the register associated with formal education. (Tan, 1990)

The Problem with Calling English Broken

Tan once used descriptions such as broken or limited English, but her essay questions the assumptions contained in those labels. Her mother's speech may differ from standardized syntax, yet it communicates complex observations, emotions, judgments, and practical needs. Listeners who focus on grammatical difference may underestimate intelligence and ignore content. The deficiency often lies in institutional listening rather than in the speaker's mind. Accent and grammar become shortcuts through which people assign credibility. Tan's mother can understand sophisticated financial and cultural matters while receiving dismissive treatment from service providers. The essay therefore separates linguistic form from intellectual capacity and exposes the harm produced when institutions fail to make that distinction. (Tan, 1990; Flores & Rosa, 2015)

Language Brokering and Institutional Power

As a child and young adult, Tan sometimes spoke on her mother's behalf in interactions with businesses and professionals. This language-brokering role gave her access to institutional authority but also placed responsibility on a family member to correct other people's unwillingness to listen. The contrast between how institutions responded to Tan and to her mother demonstrates that standard English functions as social capital. The same request receives different treatment when delivered through a voice perceived as educated and native. Literacy thus includes navigating power, not merely forming sentences. Tan's experience also reveals the emotional complexity of translation: the broker protects a loved one while seeing that respect depends on substituting one voice for another. (Tan, 1990)

Education and Narrow Measures of Ability

Tan describes educational expectations that directed students with Asian backgrounds toward mathematics or science and treated verbal creativity as less likely. Standardized assessments can reward questions with one predictable answer while underestimating interpretive or narrative skill. Her eventual career as a writer challenges the categories through which institutions evaluated ability. Anzaldúa similarly shows how schooling can teach linguistic hierarchy alongside academic content. Education can expand access to powerful forms, but it becomes assimilative when it presents one variety as the only intelligent voice. An inclusive literacy education should teach standard conventions explicitly while also analyzing their history, purpose, and limits. Students should add communicative resources rather than being required to erase existing ones. (Anzaldúa, 2012; Delpit, 2006; Tan, 1990)

Code-Switching and Rhetorical Agency

Both writers practice code-switching, shifting language or register according to audience and context. Code-switching can be a creative and strategic resource, allowing speakers to signal solidarity, precision, humor, resistance, or professionalism. It can also become exhausting when people believe that one unguarded sound will confirm a stereotype. The ability to shift should not be confused with consent to discrimination. Institutions have a responsibility to listen across difference rather than placing the full burden of adaptation on marginalized speakers. Anzaldúa sometimes switches in order to challenge the reader, while Tan describes switching that occurs within intimacy and public life. In both cases, linguistic choice becomes rhetorical agency rather than evidence of confusion. (Anzaldúa, 2012; García & Wei, 2014; Tan, 1990)

Audience and Essay Form

The two essays address audiences differently. Anzaldúa makes monolingual readers confront passages they may not understand immediately, reversing the usual expectation that bilingual speakers must translate everything for others. This difficulty becomes part of the argument about power and access. Tan uses a more conversational narrative, guiding readers through personal scenes and self-correction. Her approach invites recognition of prejudice within ordinary interactions. Both writers use autobiography as evidence, but their essays are not private confession alone. Personal experience becomes a method for analyzing institutions and cultural categories. Their credibility comes from connecting specific language encounters with broader patterns of belonging, judgment, and authority. (Anzaldúa, 2012; Tan, 1990)

Important Differences

Anzaldúa's essay develops a collective Chicana politics rooted in border history, colonial power, and the legitimacy of a named linguistic community. Tan focuses more closely on family speech, mother-daughter relationships, literary voice, and discrimination against an immigrant speaker. Anzaldúa's multilingual form is confrontational and theoretical, while Tan's narrative often moves through humor, affection, and retrospective reflection. Their communities and language histories are not interchangeable. Treating both simply as immigrant stories would erase the distinct position of Mexican American border communities and the specific experience of Chinese American family translation. Comparison is strongest when it identifies shared structures of linguistic hierarchy without collapsing historical difference. (Anzaldúa, 2012; Tan, 1990)

Literacy, Employment, and Assimilation

The original discussion suggests that fluent, accent-free English is necessary for employment and social participation. Standardized communication can indeed provide access to institutions, and students deserve the opportunity to learn it. However, accent elimination is neither a fair nor realistic definition of literacy. Many highly competent speakers retain accents, and all speakers use regional, racial, professional, or class-associated varieties. The demand to sound unmarked usually means sounding like a socially dominant group whose own language is treated as neutral. A better approach supports intelligibility, rhetorical choice, and domain-specific writing while prohibiting discrimination based on accent. Social inclusion should require institutional adaptation as well as individual learning. (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Young, 2010)

Implications for Literacy Education

Teachers can use these essays to create additive rather than subtractive literacy. Students may analyze how language changes across home, school, work, social media, and community settings; compare rhetorical effects; and learn standard conventions as tools rather than measures of human worth. Multilingual students should be allowed to draw on their full linguistic knowledge during planning, discussion, and creative work. Assessment should separate content, organization, evidence, and audience awareness from narrow assumptions about one ideal voice. Reading authors who use multiple Englishes also expands literary understanding. The objective is not to romanticize every language practice or avoid revision. It is to teach revision without teaching shame. (Delpit, 2006; García & Wei, 2014; Young, 2010)

Conclusion

Anzaldúa and Tan show that literacy is inseparable from identity, power, audience, and belonging. Both writers master formal English, but their authority comes partly from refusing the belief that mastery requires rejecting home language. Anzaldúa defends Chicano Spanish and multilingual border identity against efforts to tame them. Tan reveals the intimacy and intelligence carried by her mother's English while exposing the institutions that mistake difference for incompetence. Their essays replace a model of assimilation with one of linguistic expansion. Literacy enables participation in wider worlds, but it should also preserve the languages through which people know family, culture, and self. The educated voice is not one sound; it is the capacity to communicate, interpret, choose, and challenge. (Anzaldúa, 2012; García & Wei, 2014; Tan, 1990)

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