

# BEYOND THE WORD AND THE WOMB: PARENTING AS ANZALDÚAN ATRAVESADE

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## **ABSTRACT:**

It's a glorious desert winter day. My baby<sup>viii</sup> is on the slide, belly flat, snaking his way down. At the bottom he pops up to his toes and flings his arms to the sky. He is dancing to music only he can hear.

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It's a glorious desert winter day. My baby<sup>viii</sup> is on the slide, belly flat, snaking his way down. At the bottom he pops up to his toes and flings his arms to the sky. He is dancing to music only he can hear. The warm sun and my love are his audience. And then I hear a deep voice, another nearby parent, excitedly cheering:

Córrele! Córrele!<sup>ix</sup>

My baby stomps and spins faster, loving the attention.

¿Es tu único?<sup>x</sup>

The magic spell of this impromptu playground performance is broken.

Más o menos sí, pero no. No es mío.<sup>xi</sup>

Ah. ¿Entonces cuidas a otros niños?<sup>xii</sup>

In my compulsion to be truthful about my non-motherhood, I become nanny, family friend, babysitter, aunt. It is a brutal reminder of the ways I do not exist in other people's eyes.

Just say yes. That's what I would do. Who cares?

My baby's co-parent, and only legal guardian, encourages me to just claim my status as mom, and maybe someday I will create a space where motherhood feels like mine. But what if there is a transborder middle space between mother and everything else, and that space is where I belong? How does my "just saying yes" erase the interstitial space of home and belonging I've carved out in four years of love and life in the name of shoving myself into a box that other people can recognize?

Gloria E. Anzaldúa's intellectual work bears witness to powerful modes of interstitial existence, mapping both crossers and crossing as beings and acts of trauma, resistance, and survival:

A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary... *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal" (25).

Anzaldúa names "los atravesados" as subjects imbued with both wisdom and wounds. This model of knowledge born from the trauma and knowledge of border crossing underlies my parenting testimonio. By placing my Anzaldúan *atravesade*<sup>xiii</sup> parenting testimonio in conversation with decolonial frameworks, I assert that a queer of color lens can play a powerful role in the decolonization of restrictive and binary modes of parenting and family.

I sit in an Urgent Care at 3am with my infant's raspy lungs pressed against my chest. I engage in a familiar performance of my impotence:

Are you mom?

No. I'm a... family friend. She's on her way.

Ok let us know when she gets here. We can't do anything until then.

But I have a copy of her driver license and his insurance card. Can we at least get checked in?

I'm sorry. We can't do anything without the mother.

In her mapping of a decolonial feminism, María Lugones posits the devastating impact and efficiency of colonial frameworks upon the bodies and being of colonized peoples:

Under the imposed gender framework, the bourgeois white Europeans were civilized; they were fully human. The hierarchical dichotomy as a mark of the human also became a normative tool to damn the colonized. The behaviors of the colonized and their personalities/souls were judged as bestial and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful (743).

Like Anzaldúa's notion of *atravesades*, Lugones elucidates how colonization promotes a version of humanity accessed by aligning oneself with existing systems of power, meaning that in the Urgent Care lobby, mother equals human. The way to make myself human and ultimately intelligible to the systems of power around me as a nonbiological and nonadoptive parent is to assume the role of mother. The presumption that because I am a woman parenting a child, I must be his mother, or that I should accept or aspire to embody that role and that label is undoubtedly a colonial vestige. In the middle of the night when my child is at his most vulnerable, my invisibility damns us both.

The truth is, claiming mom scares me. Not because I'm afraid of the responsibility, I've taken all that on already. I am afraid of someone seeing that I've chosen this label and casting me out of a community to which I do not belong, because legally I don't. And above all, I am afraid that in choosing "mom" I erase myself and the parenting reality that I've lived for almost half a decade. The cost of claiming "mother" is my outsider status—saturated with the alienation of Anzaldúa's *atravesades*. "Just say that you're mom" erases the complexity of my queer care outside that label. It collapses the architecture and tears at the roots of my queerly crafted familia. I haven't yet come to terms with motherhood, nor do I have a sustainable alternative. I'd simply like to posit that the spaces outside motherhood—the margins, footnotes, and breaks in the page—yield equally interesting and important knowledge about the ways queer brown folks form familia and the truths we pass along.

With the blessings of my child's mama, I make an appointment with a lawyer to see what options exist to secure my rights and role in his life. In a moment of exhausted delirium, I let myself daydream: What if my story ends with a triumphant moment of motherhood? What if the legal channels open up to me and I fill out the forms and attend the appointments and snap the photographs, and in the end, we are both recognized as his parents, in love and law? How would that change this story? I wrestle hopefully with the blanks on my pre-consultation form:

Other party's name \_\_\_\_\_

Last address where you both cohabitated \_\_\_\_\_

Married \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_\_

I go three rounds with the receptionist, asserting that there is no "other party" because I am not trying to take this child away from his mama, but to formalize my place in our family.

Sorry, but we have to have these forms. If you could just fill out what you can...

But there is no form for our family. There are blanks for marriage, divorce, mom, and dad. There is no blank for me or the four and a half years I've dedicated to raising a beautiful being from birth.

There may never be one. But I am still here. My love stays. It curls around the sharp edges of those gendered binaries and presses into the gaps in people's assumptions. My love melts into the queer possibility of familia as act, not law.

I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but there is no second party adoption in Arizona. In the end, the triumphant conclusion is not mine to perform. I will never be my child's legal parent. The only way to maneuver around the statute is marriage. The state will not validate my existence in my child's life unless I am first wed to his only legal parent. The irony that a gay marriage is the one thing that will allow me to be legally recognized is just one more in a series of painful slashes. I hang up the phone furious, not at the compassionate lawyer, but at my ever-present desire to align myself with a system that seems to exist solely to press me into gendered binaries and marital bonds.

In mapping out the difficult path towards decolonization, Sandra Styres suggests that "There is a general unwillingness to engage in the uncomfortable process of decolonization because decolonizing is an unsettling process of shifting and unraveling the tangled colonial relations of power and privilege" (Smith 30). I cannot deny that there is power and privilege associated with the legal rights of motherhood, just as I cannot ignore my desire to be recognized, seen, and understood as a parent by the same systems that push and pull at the inertia of my unintelligibility. I want to release myself from needing those affirmations, but parenting without them creates palpable risk for my child and me. That risk speaks to something beyond motherhood. I am not a mother. Daily I parent in a space of the unknown and unspoken, of holding our breath and hoping for the best and prayers that today won't be the day my unintelligibility stands in the way of caring for my child.

We've never really seen a case like this.

There is no joy in being this rare. Theorizing about the unique erasures of Asian American women, Mitsuye Yamada declares: "To finally recognize our own invisibility is to finally be on the path toward visibility. Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone" (Moraga 40). Much like Yamada's decolonial path to visibility first necessitates a reckoning with the trauma of colonial erasure, I must acknowledge the way "just saying yes" to motherhood performs an erasure of my own interstitial experience. Without that realization, a decolonial mode of parenting is impossible.

In articulating her concept of the decolonial imaginary, Emma Pérez also cautions of the tendencies of individuals, communities, and cultures to veer towards assimilation as equality, suggesting, instead, that: "Perhaps our only hope is to move in many directions and knowingly 'occupy' an interstitial space where we practice third space feminism to write a history that decolonizes the imaginary" (20). Pérez envisions a theory with which to explode colonial binaries and forge spaces of interstitial survival. When paired with Lugones' vision of languaging as a "moving between ways of living in language" I see a path toward decolonizing my experiences of parenting and family (750).

Certainly, there is loss associated with my release of the word "mother," but there is a wealth of wisdom born in the between, as my queer familia challenges words and ways of living,

loving, and forming community. Lugones illuminates these possibilities as decolonial contradiction:

Thus to see the coloniality is to reveal the very degradation that gives us two renditions of life and a being rendered by them. The sole possibility of such a being lies in its full inhabitation of this fracture, of this wound, where sense is contradictory and from such contradiction new sense is made anew (751-2).

I feel this rendering of the binary of mother and not-mother in daily life with my child. We walk the halls and haunt the corners of the spaces in between. I speak of my queer familia as a kind of birth beyond the womb and a parenting from within the wounds of violence and erasure of brown and queer bodies and lives. Shifting away from normative definitions of parenting and family, I am invested in mapping a language of queer familia outside the colonial limits of biological and legal constructs of family. I wish to hold space for the mapping of decolonial queer familia as imperfect community, vulnerability, reciprocity, healing, and hope.

### **Contributor:**

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