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Deborah Cole

University of Texas - Pan American, dcole@utpa.edu

Rob Johnson

University of Texas - Pan American, rjohnson@utpa.edu

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“How to Tame a Wild Tongue”: Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* and the 1960s Era Speech Test and Speech Classes at Pan American College

Deborah Cole and Robert Johnson

In her frequently anthologized chapter “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Gloria Anzaldúa refers to her experiences at Pan American College in the mid-1960s with two sentences: “At Pan American University, I, and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents” (75). Pan American College is now University of Texas–Pan American, and Anzaldúa is arguably our most famous graduate. This article is based on a NACCS Tejas Foco panel presented at UTPA in 2013 to discuss the “speech test” administered at the college for several decades up through the mid-1970s. We provide a brief historical context for Anzaldúa’s description of the test and present interviews with faculty members who either took the test and the required speech classes or taught the speech classes at Pan American College in the late 1960s and early 1970s, shortly after Anzaldúa was graduated. Our discussion highlights the institutional biases Mexican–American students faced at border colleges in the 1960s and places Anzaldúa’s famous outcry against linguistic colonization in a more specific historical context.

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa was a student at Pan American College from 1965–1968. She grew up in Hargill, Texas, a small, cross-roads farming community about ten miles from the college. Her family members were farm workers, ranch workers, and migrant laborers (Anzaldúa 227). Anzaldúa matriculated at Texas Women’s University in 1962 but returned home after one year of study and eventually transferred to Pan American College. In the 1960s, few Mexican Americans attended high school, fewer graduated, and even fewer attended college. Pan American was one of the very few colleges serving south Texas and the closest to her hometown of Hargill, and its existence offered the promise of higher education and economic opportunity for the local Mexican-American community. Anne Estevis describes the importance of the college to young Mexican-Americans in the late 1950s in her short-story collection *Down Garrapata Road*. “It seemed so unreal, this idea of going to college,” says Nilda, a young woman in the collection’s final story who is finishing up high school in Edinburg, Texas. “I would be the first in my family to go to college.” When her father gives her permission to go to Pan American College, she is speechless: “I was enjoying the feeling of happiness and sense of wonder that had come over me” (118–119).

We would like to be able to write that Pan American College lived up to this “sense of wonder” in the case of Gloria Anzaldúa, and in some respects it probably did: for example, in the Spring semester of 1967, she was able to take a course on “The Frontier in American Literature,” a course that could well have started her thinking about the border issues she would later famously write about in *Borderlands*. However, her memories of the school reveal a harsh colonial aspect of her education. In “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” she tells the story of Pan American College’s mandatory speech test and its effect on her, beginning with her mother’s advice about going to college:

“I want you to speak in English. *Pa’ hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un ‘accent,’*” my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. At Pan American University, I, and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents. Attacks on one’s form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. *El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua.* Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out. (75-76)¹

This violent colonization of her native south Texas tongue becomes the basis for the chapter’s sociolinguistic defense of border languages, and is justly famous as a liberating document for the generations of writers who have felt its influence and were empowered by her words to write in the multilingual language (Spanish, English, Tex-Mex) that was their heritage.² The dramatic example she cites above as an attack on this heritage refers to two required speech classes, and our investigations also uncovered a “speech test” (which Anzaldúa does not reference) used to determine whether or not students were required to take the classes. But what was this test and what was the content of these speech classes? Perhaps more

importantly, what were the intentions of those who administered the speech test and taught the classes?

Taking the Speech Test: Interviews with Two Former PAC Students

We recently interviewed two former Pan American College students who took the test in 1963 and are now professors in the School of Education at UTPA. Both are harshly critical of the ingrained racism present in the methodology of the test and testify to its longstanding psychological effects on their personal and professional development.

Dr. Alejo Salinas, Jr. began attending Pan American College in 1963. He went on to a successful career in education and was Superintendent of Schools in Hidalgo, Texas for many years. He is currently a professor in UTPA's educational leadership PhD program. Sitting in his office in the Education School at UTPA, he described his memories of his first day at Pan American College:

I remember coming out of high school you had this great expectation that you had met the requirements for graduating from high school, which in 1963 was still quite an accomplishment for a Hispanic student—since most of them dropped out in junior high—so you were ready to attend college. I was the first in my class and home to attend college, and when I came to register I realized I had to take a speech test on the spot and without notice. It was given by a lady named Ruth Owens.

The test, he recalls, was designed to trip up the region's bilingual students, focusing on the pronunciation of th, sh, ch, and short i. Only Mexican-Americans had to take the test. If you pronounced these sounds with a Spanish-influenced accent—as almost all Mexican-American students did in the estimation of the test-givers—you were assigned to Speech 113X, a class

that met every day. His teacher, Miss Owens, whose “intentions” in correcting their accents were sincere, Dr. Salinas says, was nonetheless unprofessional in the classroom and abusive of students who showed little progress:

She would sometimes get very upset, and while she didn't throw the book at me, she threw it at other students because they were not making the kind of progress she wanted. So that was embarrassing. It was a humiliating experience and not only for me personally but for a lot of students in the class. We had to take that class to graduate.

Students hated the class and most of the instructors,⁹ but there was no mechanism for student evaluation of the class and no possibility in 1963 of protesting against the test and the behavior of the more abusive instructors:

We put up with it because we didn't know any better. Could we protest? We were not going to do anything like that. The college experience was something brand new to us. We were all wanting to have a positive experience and terrified to even complain about it to anybody because at the freshman and sophomore level you didn't have much say so and you were just lucky to have been accepted, to be in school, and terrified that they might kick you out at any point.

The experience of the speech test and of taking Speech 113X he says was a “traumatic one” that had long-term effects on his personal and professional development:

It created a situation where I didn't feel I could express myself openly and it kept me from being participatory in class. It wasn't until I started my career and matured that I had confidence—that I realized I could get over all of that. But yes, it had a negative impact on my personality, on my career, on what I wanted to do and say, and when you develop this feeling of inferiority it takes a little

while to get over it and you have to have a number of successes to offset that feeling of negativity that you develop . . . it definitely was there.

Dr. Miguel de los Santos, whose office is next door to Dr. Salinas's, also matriculated at Pan American College in 1963, and like Dr. Salinas is a former school superintendent (in Edinburg, Texas and San Benito, Texas) now working in UTPA's Educational Leadership PhD program. His memories of the speech test and Speech 113X are bitter ones, too. He emailed the following response to our questions about the test and how students survived the experience in a "spirit of carnalismo":

Took the oral English test as an entering freshman in 1963 and was found lacking. Don't remember having to take Speech two semesters but was enrolled in a M-F rather than a M-W-F or T-Th course. All of us illiterate Mexicans were to become so proficient in English that semester we would want to lose our Spanish language and culture. I am convinced that that was the psychological objective of the *pendejada*. The only good thing was that my speech instructor, besides being a good teacher, was one of the few at Pan American College who I can objectively say cared about us and believed in our potential. Thank you Mrs. Dahl! Don't remember much except feeling lesser than those who passed. Didn't question because we were not taught to do so. Those of us who failed used to put each other down for not having "passed," yet supported one another in a spirit of *carnalismo*; and, those who passed acted white and also jovially put us down. By the grace of God and a few teachers like Mrs. Dahl we survived PAC's good intentions.

Dr. de los Santos's view that the test and class had as their goal to make the students "lose our language and our culture" is remarkably similar to Gloria Anzaldúa's attack on the speech test

in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue.” Dr. Salinas, on the other hand, believes that while the intention of the teachers was to better educate the students, their methodology for doing so, for the most part, was a brutal and racist one in its overtones. Were we to interview the literally thousands of Pan American College students who took the speech test from the 1950s to the mid-1970s, we expect that their responses would reflect this range of criticism.

Initially, however, looking at the comments of these two test-takers who went on to become successful educators and who now teach at the university—making them particularly valuable informants—we can re-read Anzaldúa’s passage from “Wild Tongue” cited above and understand in more specific terms her anger about the classes and why she saw this not as a simple matter of taking proscribed courses required in her degree plan. She, along with her peers, as is evident in the interviews above, saw this as a violation of their First Amendment right to freedom of speech. She is thus quite prescient in her conclusion that the only way to “tame” tongues is to cut them out: clearly Anzaldúa and her fellow Pan Am graduates resisted such efforts in both personal and professional ways.

An Outsider’s Perspective on the Speech Test in the Early 1970s

To find out more about the speech test, and from a different angle, we interviewed Dr. Marian Monta, who joined the Communication Department in 1971 at Pan American College. Her job was created following the retirement of Ruth Owens, the strict professor who taught the speech class taken by Dr. Salinas. Dr. Monta, the first woman to graduate with a PhD in Theater from Cornell University (in 1971), has a uniquely valuable insight into the speech test. As an undergraduate student at Fordham University in the late 1940s, she, too, had taken a speech test. It was a common requirement in colleges back east, she says, and even across the United States. At Fordham University, the test was intended to rid the students of their New England

accents. Later, in the 1960s, Monta taught at two historically Black colleges, Hampton University and Prairie View A and M. At both schools, a speech test and class were in place to rid the students of southern or southern-black accents. At all of these schools, she says, every student had to take the test, not just a select group. She was surprised, therefore, to find that at Pan Am the test was, by and large, only required of the Mexican-American students and that the Texas Anglo students, whose Texas accent was painfully obvious to Monta's east coast ears, did not have to take the test.

As an east coast “foreigner,” I was amazed to see that the Anglos with the thick Texas drawls, who said “git” instead of “get,” didn't have to take the test. I would have required [name omitted by editors], one of our faculty members from Texas, to take the class, but he was a test giver, not a class taker.

From her theater background, she says, everyone has accents, but “at Pan Am it meant teaching them to speak east Texan. So it was okay to say ‘git’ for ‘get’ . . . but you could not say ‘beet’ for bit.” At freshman orientation, she says, many of the test-givers wouldn't even administer the test—they would just look to see if the student's last name ended in a vowel. Some Mexican-American students with married names or family names that were Anglo, therefore, managed to avoid the test and the class. She recalls the surprise on her colleagues' faces when a Mexican-American student would speak English without the influence of Spanish phonology to a test-giver: “Well, you certainly don't sound like a Rodriguez!” Monta, to this day, supports speech classes that teach “proper” pronunciation and articulation. However, at Pan American College, she says, the experience of giving the test had a distinctly racial tone to it, compared to the many universities where she had studied and taught.

Teaching Speech 113X: Opal White and the Speech Workbook

We wanted some insight into how the actual prescribed speech class was taught, so Monta kindly gave us her copy of the workbook that had been used in Speech 113X.⁴ This book was authored by Pan American College Communication professor Opal White, who became Monta's mother's best friend shortly after Monta arrived in the Rio Grande Valley. White had been a high school teacher in the valley and after earning her Master's degree was hired by the Department of Communication at Pan Am. After the death of her husband, White decided to pursue a PhD at the University of Oklahoma, partly to mitigate the grief she felt at her husband's passing. In 1972, at the age of sixty-two, White earned her doctorate, writing a dissertation entitled *The Mexican American Subculture: A Study in Teaching Contrastive Sounds in English and Spanish*. In her dissertation, White provides a socio-historical overview of the uniqueness of this region where the steady influx of new Spanish speakers supports the ongoing use of Spanish if not for all individuals then at least for a significant portion of the population as a whole. She then goes on to provide an overview of the language teaching and learning theories that were current at the time before laying out the general differences between the English and Spanish sound systems.

White was clearly someone who cultivated connections between her pedagogy and her scholarship. Her dissertation explicitly addresses the problem of limited access to education and economic resources that the Spanish-speaking students in the Rio Grande Valley endured in comparison to their English-speaking counterparts.⁵ Her research was the first to look explicitly at the phonological aspects of English acquisition by Spanish speaking populations in the area and among the first to look at language issues with respect to Mexican-American populations at all. In her dissertation, White notes the dearth of previous research and says that she must rely for background information on a few studies of Mexican-American populations in other areas of Texas and the Southwest more broadly. The first sentence of the section

“Rationale for Study” in her introduction makes her purpose clear: “Granted the significance for educating the Mexican American, the primary rationale for this particular study is that this subject area of concern is the most neglected in the school systems of South Texas” (*The Mexican American Subculture* 9).

Not satisfied with simply describing how language presented a barrier to local students’ academic achievement, White sought to provide a tangible, practical way to improve the Mexican-American students’ ability to attain upward social mobility. She believed that helping them to acquire standard American speech would achieve this goal. She went on to author a textbook published in 1979 which was to be used in the speech classes at Pan American University, entitled *General American Speech for the Bilingual Spanish Speaking Student*. The textbook presents the sound system for American English through careful comparison with the sound system for Spanish. The method advocated in the text involves teaching students to use the International Phonetic Alphabet to describe and differentiate the relevant sounds, showing students where to place their articulators in producing the sounds, providing exercises for practicing English sounds in different positions within words, and raising students’ awareness about the distinctive differences between the Spanish and English sound systems. Although some particulars with respect to language learning and teaching theory have changed since White’s time, the basic facts of the sound differences and the general approach she used are quite similar to those that would appear in language teaching textbooks with a focus on pronunciation published today.

Classroom Discussion of the History of the Speech Test and Anzaldúa's Borderlands

The history of the speech test and Anzaldúa's reaction to it remain relevant to current students. The ongoing contact between Spanish and English in the Rio Grande Valley continues to provide fertile ground for research on the subject of standardization itself, how it is maintained as an ideology, and how it comes into conflict with other views of language that center on variation, like the one championed by Anzaldúa and those currently espoused by sociolinguists and applied linguists.⁶ From our perspectives as linguistics and literature professors, the particular grammatical features of codeswitching, the neurological benefits of bilingualism, and the artistic creativity of writing *en dos idiomas* make Anzaldúa's position on translingual wildness a self-evident and easily defensible position. We are sometimes surprised, therefore, to hear current students, many of whom plan to become teachers in local schools, declare that (a) they believe that they themselves don't speak any language, i.e. they don't speak English or Spanish well, and (b) they believe that codeswitching is wrong and serves as evidence that people are lazy and haven't learned to speak properly. Following in the footsteps of others who have found language courses to be an ideal environment to interrogate linguistic inequalities, we walk into our classrooms with copies of Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" thinking that this world-renowned scholar with local roots might just convince our students that having and mixing multiple repertoires is perfectly normal.

What we often find in classroom discussion, however, is that even a half a century later the hegemony of language ideologies seeking to tame wild tongues is still deeply entrenched. As we prepared for our presentation at the Tejas Foco NAACS, Dr. Deborah Cole took this discussion of the speech test at Pan American College into her graduate course, "Problems in dialect, grammar, and language development." Most of these students are in an MA in ESL program and are either already teaching English locally or plan to teach English abroad upon

graduation. Having started the semester reading Rosina Lippi-Green's classic sociolinguistic book *English with an Accent: Language Ideology and Discrimination in the United States* and engaging in open discussions about the sociopolitical implications of attempting to change someone's accent, this seemed like the perfect topic to raise in class. The students were assigned the second chapter of Opal White's dissertation, "Retention of Spanish in the Southwest" (White 1972), along with the introduction to White's textbook and the pages that focused on the consonants that Dr. Salinas mentioned being singled out in the speech test. They were told about Johnson's research on the speech test and that we wanted their input for our presentation.

We started class with a general discussion of the readings, and then the students worked in groups to discuss the pedagogical approaches they would use in their own classrooms if they were using Opal's textbook to teach these sound contrasts to English learners. Students were then specifically invited to add anything for sharing during our upcoming presentation. Only two students, both middle aged women from the Rio Grande Valley, took the floor to speak. The first one said that she herself disagreed with Anzaldúa, and that we should know that not everyone around here agreed with her either. She didn't approve of Anzaldúa's use of the word "nosotras," for example, nor with her stance on gender in general. The other student wanted us to know that she felt that speech classes were the right thing for Spanish speakers who learned English and still had a Spanish accent. "Why not acquire a Standard English accent as well?" she asked, sounding remarkably like Gloria Anzaldúa's mother in *Borderlands*. "I don't see anything wrong with having a speech test for doing that," she stated.⁷

These comments resonate with others we've encountered in courses where particularly undergraduates who plan to teach in local schools speak passionately about the need to keep

Spanish and English separated and to learn “correct” varieties of each. What this tells us is that though the more overt forms of discrimination (like the speech test) have gone away, forms of covert discrimination held in place by widely shared ideologies have not. If we are to engage in socially responsible teaching, therefore, we may first have to raise student awareness of the historical contexts from which current ideologies and practices emerged. Without this, students may not be prepared to critique the current status quo, much less to resist it. And as the above example reveals, even *with* the historical context and critical discussion of national and local ideologies and practices on the table, changing ideas about language and language speakers that privilege monolingualism remains a challenge – not just in the Rio Grande Valley but also in the wider US and Mexico national contexts. But it is a challenge worth addressing, and the history of the speech test at Pan American College along with Anzaldúa’s work on linguistic intolerance provide a rich and timely resource for helping us to do so.⁸

Conclusion: Wild Tongues Still Not Tamed

Sometime during the mid-1970s the speech test was phased out at Pan American College; it is now a relic of the past unknown to today’s students at The University of Texas–Pan American. Dr. Marian Monta recalls that in 1973 after they had survived their three-year probationary (tenure) period at Pan American College, she and another colleague, Dr. Jim Hawley, took a stand and refused to administer the test anymore. Lecturers were then hired to give the test and teach the classes. The test was on its way out, though: students were becoming vocal about their opposition to the test, and faculty across the college, apparently hearing their students’ complaints, began to question the requirement as well. The truth of the demise of the speech test in the mid-70s is probably less dramatic, though: changes in the curricula at Pan American simply couldn’t accommodate the six-hour speech requirement any longer. The elimination of the test was long overdue: as early as October 1967, an Anglo reporter for the college’s

newspaper, Doug Bowe, had ridiculed the speech test in an article on freshman orientation. Describing a revolt by freshmen students against the practice of having to wear beanies, Bowe quotes a freshman on football scholarship saying, “I ain’t gon wear no bee-nee,” purposefully emphasizing the Anglo-Texan’s thick east Texas accent. The next paragraph begins, “The Speech Test . . . If you said ‘peach,’ you were okeh. If you said ‘peash’ you took the Speesh. See?” Other anecdotal information shows that students understood the absurdity of allowing Anglos to speak with an accent but not Mexican-Americans. John Simon, a McAllen businessman who played basketball for Pan Am in the late 1960s, recalls that while most Anglos did not have to take the test, one of their players did—the player was from New Jersey, and “no one could understand what he was saying.” Apparently, you could be an Anglo and speak with a Texas accent, but not a New Jersey accent!

None of these asides, however, are meant to undermine the seriousness of the speech test and the obstacles it posed for Mexican-American students at Pan American College. Perhaps it is no accident that students such as Miguel de los Santos and Alejo Salinas, Jr. went on to highly-successful careers in education, inspired, perhaps, by the negative example of the Speech Test. As Dr. Salinas told us,

I’m glad things have changed, times have changed, and that the professors themselves have become more acclimated to the type of students we have and more responsive to the needs of the students, and that’s a big, big change. The teaching standards at the time and the behavior of the professors were condescending, so that’s changed quite a bit. And of course there’s so many of us now who came back to participate in the educational program [at UTPA] and we have brought in not only our own ideas and experiences but also the desire to be of true service to the students.

Today at UTPA, students speak Spanish in hallways more often than not and write freely in Spanish and in English. There is an MFA in Creative Writing offering courses in both Spanish and in English or a combination of both, and there is a thriving bilingual, trilingual (including Tex-Mex, as Anzaldúa would have it) regional literary scene. Much of the inspiration for this comes from Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," a sacred text that is passed around to aspiring local writers who are struggling to find their voice on the border. Anzaldúa was right: wild tongues cannot be tamed. The speech test failed, everyone passed it, and it's now part of the past.

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Notes

¹ "To find a good job you have to know how to speak English well. What is the point of getting an education if you still speak English with an accent?" / "The Anglo with his innocent face ripped out our tongues."

² A number of Anzaldúa scholars comment on language suppression and linguistic terrorism in their works, many of them inspired by "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" and by the specific passage on the speech classes we use as our keystone in this essay. See, for example, Lilia I. Bartolomé, "The Struggle for Language Rights: Naming and Interrogating the Colonial Legacy of 'English Only'" and Norma Mendoza-Denton and Bryan Gordon, "Language and Social Meaning in Bilingual Mexico and the United States." However, up to this point, no scholars have investigated the specific historical and social context of Anzaldúa's reference to the speech classes at Pan American College in the mid-1960s.

³ According to Alejo Salinas, Jr., "Of the three people who taught the class, Miss Owens was perhaps the most harsh of them all. Next to her was Mr. Calderon, who was also a Spanish teacher, and he was very harsh. And then Dr. Arthur Hayes was the other professor, and he was a lot more professional in the way that he addressed the students and the way he taught the course; although I never took the class with him, the reputation was out there he was very professional, not like Miss Owens"

⁴ An earlier workbook (*Self-Improvement Speech Manual*) had been authored by an associate professor of education at PAC, Carlos I. Calderon. Its purpose, he told the Pan American newspaper in an interview in November of 1965, was to "correct the most common speech errors made by Spanish-speaking students who are learning to speak correct English" ("Pan" 4). Calderon also wrote articles on this subject for a teacher's journal, *Texas Outlook*. His M.A. Thesis at UT-Austin in 1950 was entitled "The Education of Spanish-Speaking Children in Edcouch-Elsa, Texas." He also taught Speech 113X, discussed above in footnote 1.

⁵ It is worth noting that she chose Brooks Hill as the chair of her committee. He was the first president of the International Association of Intercultural Communication Studies.

⁶ See for example recent re-definitions of “Language” as “truncated repertoires” (Blommaert 2010) and critiques of monolithic views of languages as theoretically untenable and empirically unsupportable (Hall 2013).

⁷ At this point in our research we had not recorded the dramatic interviews with Dr. Salinas and Dr. de los Santos quoted earlier in this article, and it will be interesting to see how future students respond to White’s textbook and to the speech test in the context of these *testimonios*.

⁸ See Denham and Lobeck (2010) for collaborations between linguists and public school teachers to raise awareness of and appreciation for linguistic diversity in K-12 contexts globally.

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